

Indian Streets outside India:
the Construction of Identity in Southall and Jackson Heights

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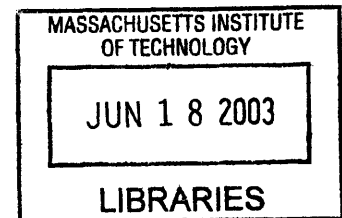
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ABSTRACT

This is a study of how street businesses owned by immigrant Indians in London and New York City construct an identity for themselves, and then lend that to the streets on which they operate. The research is conducted at Southall, a neighbourhood in West London, and at Jackson Heights in Queens, New York City. The former served as the original receiving area for rural Sikhs migrating from Punjab in the 1950s. The latter is a twenty-year-old congregation of Indian businesses in Queens.

I pose two questions. First, how have street businesses owned by Indian immigrants adapted inherited physical environments? Second, are such adaptations a deliberate attempt at asserting ethnonationalist identities, while simultaneously or independently furthering economic self-interests? My research aims to establish that in the process of earning a livelihood, immigrant Indian businesspeople construct identities and aesthetics that primarily further economic self-interests, and that these are often then mistakenly believed to be their attempts at 'establishing culture'. When the unit of analysis is the individual business, economic self-interest predominates all decisions of identity. There are different sets of circumstances in which Indian immigrant businesses advertise, surrender or disguise an Indian identity. I will also establish that the differing profiles of the Indian immigrants to the US and UK explains the contrasting births and growth trajectories of the businesses in Southall and Jackson Heights.

Thesis Supervisor: Tunney Lee

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1. INTRODUCTION

About twenty million people, not living in India, can claim lineage to the sub-continental region that presently goes by way of a nation-state.¹ The migrants left their homes in search of higher wages, in pursuit of promised opportunities, and to escape India's poverty. For many the decision was not of their own making. India's early emigrants in the nineteenth century were indentured, coerced by the ruling colonial enterprise to relocate to tropical plantations. Their labour was cheap and docile, and replaced that of African slaves recently emancipated. The emigrants found themselves in British colonies scattered all over the globe – several in islands of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. Many stayed on and have since engendered isolated Indian communities, establishing over time significant political presences. Others, not indentured, made the initial journey of their own volition. They settled in East Africa, the United Kingdom, and more recently, and very successfully, the United States.

In this thesis, I study the streets of immigrant Indians in the United Kingdom and the United States. The two groups are of recent dislocations. The first, comprising rural Sikhs, migrated to England in the 50s to fill a post-war labour shortage. The second group, comprising educated professionals from urban India, is the displaced product of their ongoing flight to the developed West – predominantly the United States. Commencing in 1965, their migration is considered the biggest made by any Indian group.² To their streets (via two representative cases), I pose two questions. First, how have street businesses owned by Indian immigrants adapted inherited physical environments? Second, are such adaptations a deliberate attempt at asserting ethnonationalist identities, while simultaneously or independently furthering economic self-interests?

¹ 'India Harvests Fruits of a Diaspora' in the *New York Times*, 12 January 2003. The McKinsey report that the article referred to also noted that the twenty million diaspora produces income that is about 35% of the India's GDP (produced by the other billion Indians).

² 'Exodus', cover story in *Outlook*, 20 January 2003 issue (Indian weekly published from Delhi).

I set out the analysis in a light framework with three broad determinants of identity. The first regards ethnonational assertiveness. Theory, mostly anthropological, will say that Indian immigrants reify India, and reproduce an abstract and imagined norm of their homeland.³ A political strand of this literature argues that the reproduction occurs not because of an instinctual urge to pursue an Indian lifestyle (imagined or real), but that by exhibiting an exaggerated Indian, Punjabi or Gujarati identity, immigrants will gain respectability and acceptance in Western cultures that favourably view neatly-boxed ethnic identities.⁴ Sikh identity in the West serves as a good example. In the early '80s some Sikhs, mostly in Canada and the United Kingdom, demanded a nation-state for themselves - Khalistan (coterminous with Indian Punjab). It is argued that though these expatriate Sikhs would never come back to reside in Khalistan, they were the most vocal because a neatly structured ethnonational origin would lend credibility and respectability to the Sikhs in the West. So for expatriate Sikhs, Khalistan was not a demand for a homeland, but a complicated and surrogate demand for Sikh acceptance in an adopted homeland.⁵

But, I will dwell only briefly on issues that my first determinant raises. Street businesses are my unit of analysis, and they kept my research firmly focused on the

³ See *Culture, Power, Place: Exploration in Critical Anthropology*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997) for critiques on the relationship of self and society to places of origin, and places of dislocation.

A word also here for India's very successful diasporic writers, who create their versions of India in fictional prose. Their work thrives detached from India and in Salman Rushdie's words (*Imaginary Homelands*): they 'will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short create fictions, not the actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind'. Rushdie and others have cultivated a space that diasporic Indians writer occupy with much skill and sophistication.

⁴ Verne A. Dusenbery, "A Sikh Diapora? Contested Identities and Constructed Realities" in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp.17-42. Dusenbery speaks of the 'confusion and frustration' British census enumerators encountered when assigning 'identities' to Punjabi's in neatly organised statistical categories (who like all in the sub-continent wore overlapping religious, caste and linguistic identities very loosely).

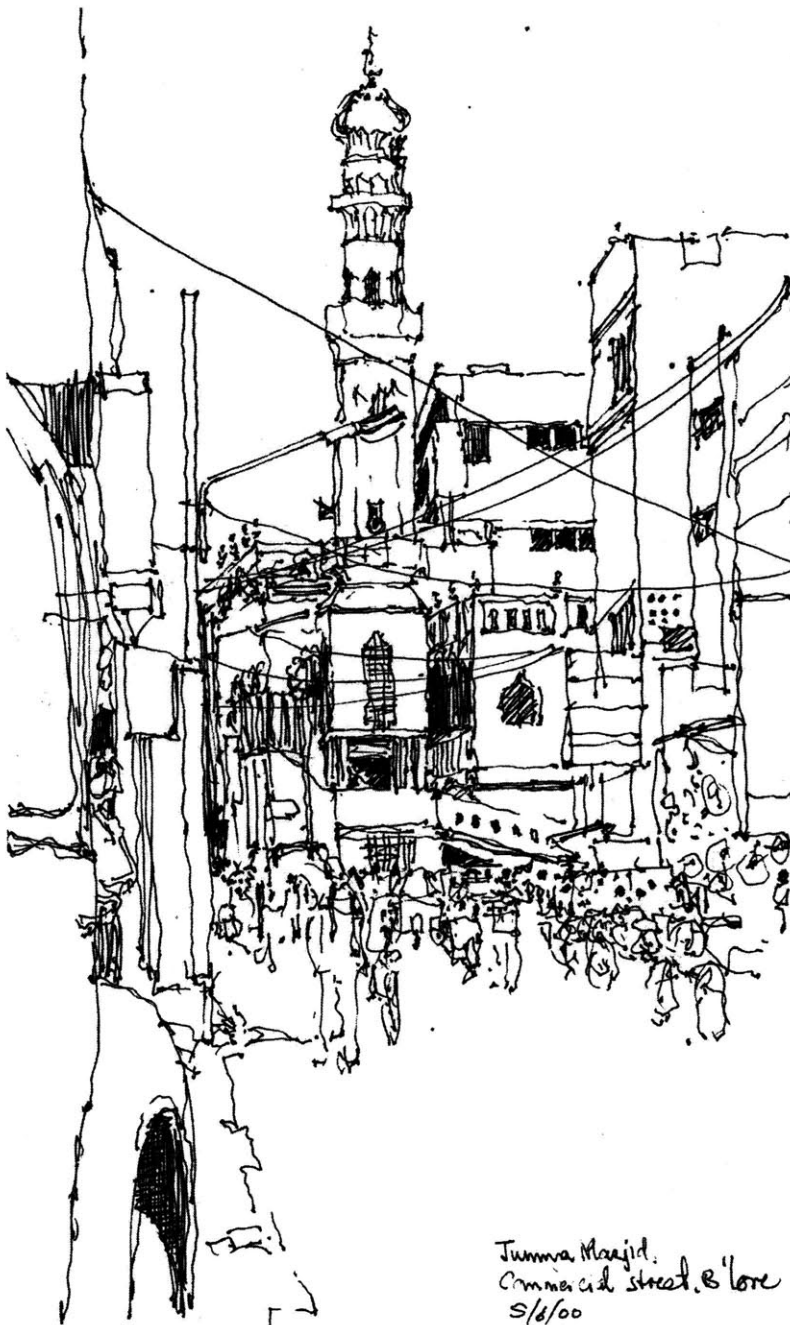
⁵ *Ibid.*

second of my three determinants of identity – that of economic self-interest.⁶ The street, an economic animal and the object of my research, sustains itself on the collective attractiveness of the identities that its businesses individually adopt. It was clear, intuitively first and then corroborated by my research, that business owners rarely adopt positions for reasons anything other than economic. Many business owners were outright dismissive of a postulation that suggested otherwise. In the chapters that follow I will discuss how and why in different circumstances Indian immigrant businesses advertise, disguise, or surrender an Indian identity. My evidence may suggest that some businesses do assert an identity not driven by economics. But, I will argue that these businesses selectively draw from a common pool of cultural imagery and myths to wear identities that are ultimately, in fact, serving an economic self-interest. Also (and counter-intuitively), their appearance is born not of their own image preferences (as the anthropological literature would argue), but from their perception of what a customer pool thinks it should really look like. For example, when serving mainstream Londoners or New Yorkers, often the norm that immigrant businesses aspire to is not the reified India that lies within their own minds, but the exotic India that they think lies within the mind of the Western consumer. Others, that serve mainly Indian customers, use refined cultural triggers to establish their authenticity and credibility to a discerning and aware customer pool. Still others, are deliberate in concealing their Indian identity. In this last case, a risky non-conforming identity would be detrimental to their economic position (I use the corner shops of London, predominantly Indian-

⁶ A literature that looks at immigrant Indian street businesses through this lens does not exist. A literature on the socio-economic potential of ethnic enclaves does exist. It has sociological origins in 'culture contact'. Bruce La Brack's work on the Sikhs of Northern California includes an overview (in turn culled from Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life*). He identifies three theories: Anglo-conformity, Melting pot and Cultural pluralism, each holding sway at various times in academic circles. However, integration continues to be a normative attitude in most of the literature. Anthropologist Hilda Kuper had an opinion about that (quoted in RR Ramchandani, 1976): "Cultural assimilation is largely a reciprocal of political dominance and those who are supposed to assimilate...are in fact expected to subordinate the culture that was their own." Some of the current literature often by first generation academic sojourners/immigrants (a category that I fit into as well) has come to temper the assimilative tone of the earlier literature. Min Zhou's *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) is a good example.

owned, as an example). Ultimately, businesses brand themselves to increase their economic potential and worth, positioning themselves to appear most attractive to their targeted customers. My research aims to establish that in the process of earning a livelihood, immigrant businesspeople construct identities and aesthetics that primarily further economic self-interests, and that these are often then mistakenly believed to be their attempts at 'establishing culture'.

*Near Commercial
Street, Bangalore*



*Jumma Masjid,
Commercial Street, B'lore
5/6/00*

The third category is mundane, and bereft of any deliberateness. It is, however, mainly responsible for the Indian-ness that the streets putatively have. Immigrants arrive with norms carried from India, a place with a very different climate, social structure, and income levels. For example, their urge to capture the street and conduct business on it stems from several origins, all Indian (though not exclusively). They come from a warm climate that sees less distinction between inside and outside than the cold West does. They come from an economic system that is characterised by a lack of capital, where temporary street trading spots require lower initial investment than serviced retail stores. They also come from a civic system where local authorities are less likely to enforce minor (even major) encroachments. When in England and the US, they continue, if

permitted, to practise what they did in, or what they remember of India. Other things they do for reasons that are practical and born of expected common sense and simple logic. Indian grocers have cluttered shops because they import much of their stock in bulk from distant India, and therefore maintain high inventories. They are immersed in spice ridden odours because that is how Indian groceries smell. Both, clutter and odour, are key triggers that identify an Indian grocer. Yet, there is nothing deliberate in this identity. Much of what I document in the following chapters lies in this unintentional category.

This framework of triple determinants that I describe has not arisen solely from, or for this research. It has also emerged from my analysis of my recent life in the States. I have lived away from India for a year and a half. I am not an immigrant to the US, though I am one of the 66,836 Indian

students that arrived here in 2001.⁷ About 90 percent of this group is not likely to go back home.⁸ In my academic world, the mechanisms of my identity, devoid of most economic constraints, oscillate between intellectual grappling and whimsical dabbling. In the beginning, eighteen months ago, I spoke my English clearly and



Spices & Plastic buckets on South Rd, Southall 18th March 03

South Road, Southall

⁷ Open Doors 2002, report on international education (New York: Institute of International Education, 2002).

⁸ 'Exodus', cover story in *Outlook*, 20 January 2003 issue. The article was not clear in how it determined this very believable figure.

slowly, careful that I was understood. Being articulate in the language is a marker of the urban elite in India, and is a prerequisite for upward mobility. I was one of the six percent of my country that was comfortable understanding and expressing themselves in English.⁹ At MIT, I felt relief, conflated perhaps with pride (many certainly did), that Indian students were not expected to take the English test for foreign students.

But in the States, English is no social trophy. It soon seemed artificial to be conversing with my fellow Indians in English. I also sensed that Indian English, the cold language of social mobility on the sub-continent, was viewed with some amusement in the States (this more imagined than real). The language was not really ours but one that we had conveniently co-opted. I thought I was expected to speak Hindi (or some Indian language), because that is what Indians are supposed to speak. Hindi, my second language at school, was either spoken within my family, or in arguments with bus conductors on the streets of Delhi. Its simultaneous domestication and bowdlerisation, had reduced my vocabulary of this refined, but abandoned language, to rudimentary levels. I was never comfortable in using it for extended and involved conversations.

But, now I speak Hindi more often than I did while in Delhi. Conversations with my Indian friends that I would have had in English in Delhi, I now have in forced Hindi in Cambridge. Fortunately, my Hindi has improved. On my shelf are six Hindi books – novels and short stories by Premchand, a narrator of stories from rural north India of the early twentieth century. I had my parents send them from Delhi six months after arriving in Cambridge. The stories have been unread for an anguished year, their Hindi still too dense for me to wade through.

My identity, part game, part genuine, extends beyond the linguistic. I wear my cotton *kurtas* (knee-length upper wear from north India) and *pajamas* on pleasant

⁹ Archana Burde, *The Politics of Indians' English : Linguistic Colonialism and the Expanding English Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

summer days. On defiant days, I wear it to cockily retort to the anticipated appreciation of my 'traditional' attire – “it's contemporary from where I come.” At restaurants I deliberately use my fingers to eat wet rice (as all Indians do). I relish the awkward glances my messy fingers draw. I stubbornly persist with Indian English pronunciations, aware that I am not being understood. Most of this has become more fun than struggle.

But I cannot playact my identity indefinitely to derive simplistic satisfaction from trivial non-conformist pleasures. For a recent career fair, I debated whether to wear my *kurta* and decided not to in these unhealthy economic times. The determinants of my identity are moulded in the protection of MIT's Dome café and in the liberal length of its Infinite Corridor. Outside, the world is a very different place, one whose economic determinants immigrant businesses have to decipher, master and invert to survive.

LEAVING HOME

The Indian immigrants that I study in this thesis, in the United Kingdom and the United States, left India in the last fifty years. They are the most recent additions to the country's migration history. However, that history has been dominated more by the stories of those that India receives – immigrants, invaders, missionaries, and colonisers, and less by those that it sends. The Aryans invaded four thousand years ago. The first Christians came with St. Thomas two thousand years ago, followed by a small number of Jews. Next, came the Parsis from Persia. The Muslims galloped in a thousand years ago, followed by the sailing Europeans. Last came the British in the 18th century. Concealed within this unidirectional narrative are the stories of Indians who have left the sub-continent. The last two hundred years have seen the greatest migration, but the earliest is from a thousand years ago.

The Romany, known as the Gypsies by all but themselves, have had the most intriguing departure. In a television documentary on the Romany, I was struck by the similarity of their language, Romani, to Hindi. They used *achhaa* for OK, and

goro for white; words that I also use in my Hindi. Similarities, more extensive than my layman observations, were discovered two hundred years ago by linguists, and provided the first evidence of an origin in India.¹⁰ The evidence since has remained mainly linguistic. There is consensus over an Indian origin, and a departure around the ninth century AD, but debate over where exactly from in India. But the debate has mere academic significance, for there is nothing Indian about the Romany anymore. They speak a language, much evolved and adapted, that ties them to an unremembered land of which they carry no myths, and with which they maintain no linkages. They have evolved an itinerant existence that ensures their survival, if only just, in a world where they economically depend on the mainstream, which in return has constantly shunned and persecuted them, and stereotyped them as thieving parasites.

Lascars, Indian sailors in colonial times, were present in England in the 18th century. They predated the next wave of maritime Indians – the Coolies, not sailors but indentured labour. In India they are known as *Girimits*, a corruption of “agreement”, the document that each signed before leaving the country. Coolies, predominantly from India, were shipped by the British from one part of their empire to another to plug labour shortages. Basil Lubbock, an American maritime author of the first half of the 20th century, had this to say: “There is probably no greater proof of progress in the history of mankind than that which is shown by the comparison of the slave trade with the coolie trade.”¹¹ He goes on: “Until recent years the weak have always been enslaved by the strong: indeed, it is only since the Great War that the strong man has bound his weak and ignorant brother upon his shoulder and attempted to carry him along with all his other burdens.”¹² His benevolent Coolie trade began in 1834, the year the British abolished slavery. Forty Indian Coolies were taken to Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. By 1856, there were

¹⁰ Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.14.

¹¹ Basil Lubbock, *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailors* (Boston: Charles E. Lauriat Co., 1935), p.1.

¹² *Ibid.*

134,271 Indians, “hard working and easily managed”, in Mauritius.¹³ Lubbock did not like the Chinese – “undoubtedly the most unfeeling race on the globe, who did not make good coolies...the Chinaman is a very different proposition from the docile Indian coolie”. Coolies from India continued to flood the colonial plantations in the West Indies, the Indian Ocean and Africa, till the trade was stopped in 1916. By then, more than two million Coolies were shipped out of India – 450,000 to Mauritius, 400,000 to South Africa, and 250,000 to Malaya accounting for about half the trade. Others found themselves in Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Fiji, and the Maldives.¹⁴

The literature of the Coolie experience is extensive.¹⁵ VS Naipaul, of Indian lineage from Trinidad, is its most famous author. His early fictional work is critical of the Indians of Trinidad in arrogantly skilful prose – “a peasant-minded, money-minded community spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society.”¹⁶ His encounter with India, “ancient and unbroken”, and half remembered, was sobering – “But nothing had prepared me for the dereliction I saw. No other country I knew had so many layers of wretchedness, and few countries were as populous. I felt I was in a continent where, separate from the rest of the world, a mysterious calamity had occurred.”¹⁷ Now, cricket brings less deprecating descendants of the Coolies back to India. The game of Empire, popular still among its past subjects, has Indians in the Indian team play against the Indians in the West Indian team, and the Indians in the Kenyan team. For many in India, fleeting television images of these

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹⁴ Bruce La Brack, *The Sikhs of Northern California, 1904-1975* (New York: AMS Press, 1988), p.18. Figures come from La Bracks’s extensive and detailed overview of Indian immigration.

¹⁵ See Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002) for an overview of the literature produced by them.

¹⁶ VS Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur. A House for Mr. Biswas* is his classic about the angst-ridden search for personal identity and escape from the rigid social norms that evolved in Indian communities in Trinidad.

¹⁷ VS Naipaul, “The Writer in India” in *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), p. 44.

players with familiar names but strange spellings have kindled a curiosity for the Girmits that left their country more than a century ago.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the west coast of North America had to contend with the “tide of turbans”.¹⁸ They were Sikh (a group I will encounter in my first case study in London). The phrase was an exaggeration for not more than 6,400 immigrants from India (predominantly Sikh) entered the States from 1903 to 1920.¹⁹ Riots pushed out many that did. In 1907, in Bellingham, Washington, seven hundred Sikh were chased across the Canadian border by American workers.²⁰ Other Sikhs moved south to Northern California and took to fruit farming. Indians then had an unclear racial identity in the States, whose founding fathers had granted rights of naturalised citizenship to whites alone. The ‘Hindoos’ (mostly Sikh really) were at first accepted as white, but considered inferior. In 1910, the Asiatic Exclusion League, a San Francisco based organisation, argued against the right of citizenship for Indians, even though they putatively shared a common racial ancestry, because their ‘forefathers...went east and became enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded’²¹ (ideological fodder now, for the chauvinist Hindu Right in contemporary India). Legislation, litigation and lobbying early in the 20th century ensured that by 1924, immigration from India was halted.²² The Sikhs of northern California were overwhelmingly men.²³ With no new immigrants expected, many married Mexican women. Sikh identity appeared on a steady downhill path. But in 1946 (when there were less than 1,500 Indians in the States), changes in immigration once again opened the gates of Indian immigration. In

¹⁸ Ronald Takaki, “The Tide of Turbans” in *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Back Bay, 1998), pp.294-314.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.294.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.297. La Brack (*op. cit.*, p.70) also lists similar riots in Seattle and Everett.

²¹ Takaki, *op. cit.*, p.298.

²² La Brack, *op. cit.*, p. 70. In 1917, India was included in the in the ‘Barred Zone’ law that stopped all Asian immigration but from Japan. Takaki, *op. cit.*, p.300. In 1923, a court decision made the Hindoos definitely non-white, and in 1924 the Immigration Act made immigration impossible for those who were ineligible for naturalisation

²³ Takaki, *op. cit.*, p.308. Women constituted 0.24% of the 5,000 Indians in California in 1914.

1965, immigration quotas were removed, making immigration even easier. Sikhism in California has since seen a resurgence, as immigrants from Punjab came sponsored by relatives. The community, more than 10,000 strong, is concentrated in Yuba City and very successful – producing more than half the country’s cling peaches.²⁴ Elsewhere, another wave of migration from Punjab saw the establishment of a Sikh community in post-war England. That group, located in West London, forms the first of my two case studies.

Closer home, Indians had settled on Africa’s east coast and the islands of Zanzibar and Madagascar in the eighteenth century.²⁵ They came from Gujarat and Kutchh, on India’s west coast, as traders and were transient residents. They came with the returning Monsoon winds in the winter, with goods bought on credit, and went back with the monsoons just after summer, to repay their creditors in India.²⁶ Coolies came late in the 19th century, when the English built the Ugandan railway connecting Mombasa with Lake Victoria. In the five years from 1896 that it took to build the railway, 31,983 coolies were brought from India.²⁷ They came on three year contracts with free return passages. Though less than a quarter chose to stay in Africa, in 1901 there were about 35,000 Indians in the East African Protectorate.²⁸ The success of the Ugandan railway induced the coastal Indian traders to move inland, prompting a further migration from India’s west coast early in the 20th century. In time the Indians were typecast first as shopkeepers, then wholesalers and industrialists. They occupied the intermediate ground in racial relationships and

²⁴ *The New Puritans: the Sikhs of Yuba City* (documentary film), produced: Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, 1985. The film discusses the generational conflicts that arise when offspring are born in a culture that the parents did not grow up in. Online searches indicate that the agricultural statistic still persists.

²⁵ Agehananda Bharti, *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uburu* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1972), p.10, and John Irving Zarwan, *Indian Businessmen in Kenya during the Twentieth century: A case study* (Yale University History PhD, 1977), p.48.

²⁶ John Irving Zarwan, *op. cit.*, p.42, and HS Morris, *Immigrant Indian Communities in Uganda* (University of London PhD Thesis, 1963), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ *The Ghost and Darkness*, a 1996 Hollywood movie tells the real story of two man-eating lions that stopped the construction of this railway line.

²⁸ HS Morris, *op. cit.*, p.28.

served goods 'up' to British and 'down' to the Africans.²⁹ In 1972, General Idi Amin Dada asked all fifty thousand to leave. Through their entire stay in Uganda, Indians never constituted more than a percent of Uganda's population.³⁰ Kenya, too, in previous years had introduced work restrictions for non-native residents. Many East African Indians migrated to the United Kingdom as they held British passports. But this was not so easy as it may appear. The British government set an annual cap of 1,500 British families entering Great Britain from Africa.

India is presently in the midst of its greatest migration. For the past 30 years urban professionals have been migrating to the West (and to New Zealand and Australia). In the States, which since 1965 has allowed the entry of educated professionals, they have famously found success. They came in educated hordes – in some years of the 70s, more than 90 percent of Indian immigrants were technical professionals or their families.³¹ Before 1965, a few hundred would immigrate each year. In the 70s this number rose close to 20,000, and in the 80s, even higher to 30,000. A 1976 amendment stopped the arrival of medical professionals.³² But by then the Indians were successful, upwardly mobile and well established. There are now about 2 million persons of Indian origin in the States (more than a million born here). Their average income is 50 percent higher than the national average, and they are one of the richest ethnic communities.³³ This rich suburban group considers itself a 'model minority', a term that affluent Indians Americans have grown fond of

²⁹ Bharti, *op. cit.*, p.10.

³⁰ RR Ramchandani, *Uganda Asians: the End of an Enterprise* (Bombay: United Asia Publications, 1976), pp. 255-283. The Indians were affluent and also considered guilty of not deigning to integrate with the Ugandans. Idi Amin, in his expulsion order, cited the lack of any example where an Indian girl had married an African man on Ugandan soil (allegedly there were six such marriages that took place out of Uganda). 50,000 Indians left in three months in late 1972. For a personal and scholarly account see Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Ugandan Asians come to Britain* (London: Francis Pinter, 1973).

³¹ Maxine Fisher, *The Indians of New York City: A study of Immigrants from India* (Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 1980), p. 11. In 1975, 93% of Indians admitted were 'professional/technical workers' or their families.

³² Madhulika Khandelwal, "Indian Immigrants in Queens, New York City: Patterns of Spatial Concentration and Distribution" in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp.179-196.

³³ 'India Harvests Fruits of a Diaspora' in the *New York Times*, 12 January 2003.

using for themselves.³⁴ The political and urban elite in India (many represented in the US by successful relatives) sees it with pride too, showering it with paternal praise.³⁵

Things have changed though, and no longer does the model minority look so rich and successful. Recent immigrants in the 80s and 90s have not necessarily been skilled or professional. Many came sponsored by relatives already here. This lower end of the Indian immigrant population does not live in suburban conservative America like its more affluent predecessors; but, in places like rough and working class Queens in New York City. They are not doctors and engineers, but taxi drivers, newsstand agents and blue-collar workers. My second case study, situated in Queens, looks at the post-1965 Indian immigrants to the States.

METHODOLOGY

I will pose my research questions to two representative case studies – Southall in London, and Jackson Heights in New York City. The former is a neighbourhood in west London that served as the Sikhs' original receiving area in the late 50s. The latter is a twenty-year-old congregation of Indian businesses in Queens. Disregarding their superficial and expected similarities, these neighbourhoods occupy contrasting positions in the diasporic Indian consciousness of their respective host countries. Southall, the original settlement, continues to serve as the fountainhead of British Sikh culture. Jackson Heights, on the other hand, is home to the small but growing low-end of the famously successful Indian American community. It is the marginalised underbelly unacknowledged by the community's

³⁴ The term is also used by other Asian immigrant communities. The term is a device of social acceptance. It describes a minority that is malleable and non-problematic (not like the troublesome and rioting Blacks). The model minority comprises peaceful, educated and non-threatening professionals who are contributing to, not leeching, from the American system.

³⁵ 'India Harvests Fruits of a Diaspora' in the *New York Times*, 12 January 2003. LK Advani, India's deputy Prime Minister was quoted as saying that India's influence had widened thanks to the 'high socioeconomic profile the Indian community now commands in the United States.'

affluent mainstream (or elite international travelers from India for that matter), and is often swept under the Indian American carpet.

The disparate roles that these spatial congregations play reflect the markedly different profiles of immigrants to the US and UK. The British Sikhs came as working class migrants from rural Punjab who did not speak English, and were often uneducated. It was a group that felt the need to congregate in cold and conservative London, and did so very successfully in Southall. Indian Americans, in contrast are known to be urbane, English-speaking, white collar, and upwardly mobile professionals. The American way of life provides for them and consequently their need for the kinship, filial and linguistic resources that a spatial congregation provides is minimal. Jackson Heights is thus not an expected physical manifestation of the ‘model minority’. It has expanded and thrived since the 80s, and now reflects the widening class distribution of the community.

The two case studies are not the product of rigorous selection processes. I was aware of Southall and its Punjabis before arriving in the States. I had not heard of Jackson Heights until after arriving at Cambridge, filtered through the grapevine of the diasporic Indian world. Southall, far away across the Atlantic, made itself an option after MIT’s urban design studio took me to England in December 2002. Jackson Heights’ proximity to Cambridge brings it to this thesis. I could also have chosen Yuba City in Northern California, Edison in New Jersey, or Devon Avenue in Chicago. They are all home to Indian businesses and populations. But I knew nothing more about any of them that would have justified choosing them over Jackson Heights – physically closer and more iconic in my mind (thanks to the East coast diasporic Indian grapevine). I made two visits to Southall, spending fifteen days in all. In Jackson Heights, I spent six days over two trips.

The case studies, each comprising a chapter, have a definite structure comprising three sections. The first narrates an evolutionary history of the immigrant congregation. The second describes the street. The last provides a descriptive documentation of a few representative businesses and their owners.

From Southall, I have eight documented businesses, and from Jackson Heights I have five. I met many more people however (not just business people), and my encounters with all of them comprise the bulk of this thesis. I was keen to observe my respondents personality and build it into my narrative to sketch a fleshed out portrait of business and business owner. I sought for and noted the adjectives and verbs they used to represent themselves and their businesses. The words hinted at how they perceive themselves, and also how they would want the world to perceive them (of which I was an inquiring representative). As much and as often as I could, I have quoted the words they spoke. My reconstructions of these encounters are necessarily anecdotal, and the narrative is strongly and deliberately encounter driven.

In addition, at my encounters I ticked off elements from a pre-prepared list (the full list is included in Appendix A).³⁶ Inside the store, I collected details on décor, art, serving staff, layout and music. Outside, I noted the business's relationship with the street, its signage, display window, flyers and publicity material. When handed a business card, I noted the few carefully crafted adjectives on the little piece of paper. Finally, I asked for information on typical customer profiles. When possible, I also visited the business's website. Often it revealed a strategic and structured position, more sophisticated than what was revealed to me in an impromptu thirty minute interview. In Southall's case, the live web broadcast of Sunrise Radio – “Britain's largest Asian radio station”, was invaluable. It is headquartered in Southall, and carries the advertisements of several local businesses. It provides a glimpse of how Southall constructs and presents itself in non-physical manner. Unfortunately, Jackson Heights does not have a free broadcast identity. The radio station that its

³⁶ The urban design literature on observing and reading the environment is extensive. I drew from Lynch (*Image of the City*, 1960), Zeisel (*Inquiry by Design*, 1981), and Jacobs (*Looking at Cities*, 1985) in preparing the list of elements to document. I did not however, refer to Jacobs' beautifully illustrated, but normative and value laden 'Great Streets'. In the chapters that follow I have also adapted a Lynchian technique of the thumbnail graphic accompaniment that visually captures the idea of a paragraph in a wider than usual outer margin.

businesses play and advertise on is not local, and available only through an expensive subscription.

I used local press reports to construct and narrate the evolutionary history of Southall and Jackson Heights. At the Ealing Local History Centre in London, I found archived press reports of the Southall edition of the West Middlesex Gazette dating back to the early 50s – a time when the Sikhs had freshly arrived in Southall, and to a not very pleasant welcome. Expectedly, the Gazette was a treasure trove of preserved antagonism. From it, I have inserted statements made by local residents and politicians in full to capture the tones and emotions that a paraphrase would have necessarily lost. Press reports for Jackson Heights were not as easy to come by. I relied on online academic archives of press reports. In addition, I perused current copies of local Indian American weekly papers. But, my reading of those was not extensive in a historical sense, and I cannot claim a greater understanding of the Indian American world from my meager exposure to its printed representation.

The academic literature on Southall is extensive when compared to Jackson Heights. The former is an object of anthropological fascination, and the site of many ethnographic sojourns. Jackson Heights is not so fortunate. It is more recent and not a fossilised specimen as unique as an enclave of rural Sikhs in cosmopolitan London.³⁷ Besides, the Indian immigrant presence in Queens is routine, merely one of several others. Madhulika Khandelwal's ethnographic research published in 2002 is the only scholarly work.³⁸ Popular work, like Kaisad Gustad's "Cornerhouse Blues", a short feature film about a newsstand worker in Jackson Heights, is usually ordinary and perpetuates rather than questions stereotypes.³⁹ On the other hand,

³⁷ See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) for a critique of the anthropological fascination with India. The sharpest critiques come from within. Cohn, himself an anthropologist, discusses the origins of anthropology in the colonial mode of controlling knowledge. To the Orientalists of the 18th century, Europe was progressive and changing, while India static – "a living fossil bed", that Europe could better package, inferiorise and rule.

³⁸ Madhulika Khandelwal, *Becoming American, being Indian : an immigrant community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³⁹ Milne, M., K. Gustad, et al. (1993). *Corner store blues*. Its plug: "A young man from India,

popular expressions of Southall's life are more refined and skillfully presented. "Bend it Like Beckham", a feature film released in 2002 is popular as well as subtly intellectual.

In the chapters that follow I often refer to the 'mainstream'. I use the term loosely as the collective sum of economic and cultural characteristics of all social groups, but the group in question. I acknowledge the category is not real and hence, it must necessarily be coloured by the generalisations and stereotypes similar to those that the 'mainstream' is believed to make about the marginal. I also regret not being able to get significant stories from 'mainstream' respondents. In particular, my inability to meet Somali representatives in Southall, and representatives of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group in Queens denies both cases a truly comprehensive and even-handed picture of local politics.



running a newsstand for his uncle in the East Indian section of Jackson Heights in the New York City borough of Queens, is trying, without success, to break into the entertainment world as a blues singer incorporating elements of East Indian folk music into American blues. His uncle disapproves of this quite heavily, takes the newsstand away from him, and turns him out on to the street, where he sings his brand of blues as a street musician".

I made the pen-and-ink travel sketch the medium of observing and recording the street environments of Southall and Jackson Heights. The sketches will, I hope, lend a graphic quality to the thesis, and also serve as valid evidence in support of the arguments I make. Each sketch, drawn with a black roller-ball pen on white paper, five by nine inches, takes about thirty minutes to complete. The performance provides an easy way to get people to talk – serving hence, a guiltlessly selfish way of gathering additional respondents. At the outset I had intended to illustrate this thesis with sketches alone. That changed on my second trip to Southall. After making twenty five sketches I belatedly realised that taking a hundred photographs consumes less time than making five sketches. In the time-deprived madness that April (really the cruelest month) brought, sketches seemed an extravagant whim. Consequently, I drew a lot less and photographed a lot more in Jackson Heights, the latter of my field trips.

However when representing the streets, I use the sketch exclusively. Drawn in a thirty minute interval, I believe it captures the dynamic ambience and shifting visual quality of the street better than the split-second shutter of a digital camera. The imagery rendered on paper is selective and also surreal. Like a delayed exposure photograph, the sketch might show two cars parked in the same parking spot, or a baby carriage being pushed by swift invisible parents, too quick for my slow fingers to draw. All interior images are photographs. I think a sketch would have nothing to add by way of kinetic ambience. I also use photographs in before-after comparisons with archival photographs.⁴⁰ Each sketch has an illegible title scrawled across its bottom. I use additional captions only when the image needs to be read independently of the text. In all other cases, the image in the outer margin accompanies and graphically represents the idea contained within a paragraph (a publishing device adapted directly from Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City*). In the end, I had thirty four sketches in all – twenty five from Southall and nine from Jackson Heights.

⁴⁰ The archival photographs from Southall are taken from Jonathan Oates, *Images of England: Southall* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2001).

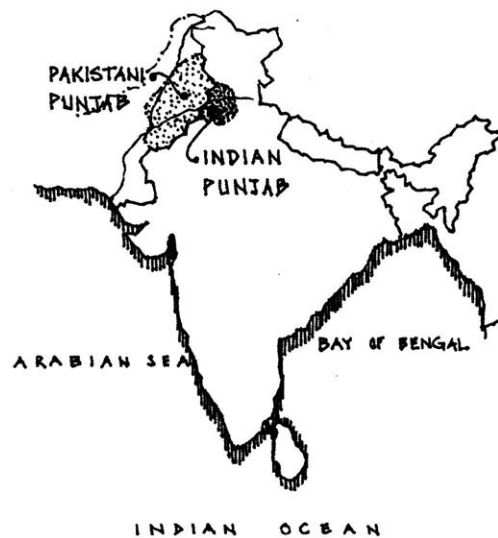
2. SUTHAAL: A PUNJABI ACQUISITION IN WEST LONDON

My home is England; yours is India. There is no place like home
and I hope you will be able to return there sometime.¹

Words said in 1958 by the Mayor of Southall, Johnson Haigh. He was addressing a gathering of immigrants celebrating India's tenth anniversary of independence. The men had recently come from Punjab, a place far away and very different. Unknown then, to them and the Mayor, Southall and Punjab would have an enduring encounter in the latter half of the twentieth century; one that engendered a thriving Punjabi town in unlikely West London. Suthaal, Southall's Punjabi reincarnation is the subject of research in this chapter.

PUNJAB

Punjab is a fertile plain drained by five rivers in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. It straddles the borders of present day India and Pakistan, and has seen partition twice in the twentieth century. First religiously apportioned between Indian and Pakistan in 1947, and then carved linguistically to beget the new Indian states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in 1966. What remained of Punjab is now home to the Sikh. They constitute sixty percent of the population of the modern Indian state, and over three quarters of all twenty four million Sikh live here.²



The Sikh are the Punjabi-speaking turbaned men and longhaired women of North India. About 1.5 million live outside India. They are the followers of a religion started by Guru Nanak in Punjab in the sixteenth century. They are also famously proud and entrepreneurial. Sikh men are referred to as Sardars (turbaned

¹ West Middlesex Gazette – Southall edition, August 16, 1958 (from the archives of the Local History Centre, Ealing Council, London).

² Shinder Purewal, *Sikh ethnonationalism and the political economy of Punjab* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

leaders), and the women Sardarnis. The salutation, originally of respect, now often conflates with mockery.³ Sikhs are relatively well off compared to other religious and ethnic groups in India. They constitute a little over two per cent of the Indian population, but are over represented in the bureaucracy, police and army.⁴ The agriculturally rich delta of the three remaining Indian rivers (the other two are now in Pakistan) accounts for 1.5 percent of the country's land area, yet supplies two thirds of the country's central food reserves.⁵ It is also India's richest state.⁶

Guru Nanak, Sikhism's founder, rejected the idolatry, rigid caste hierarchy and polytheism of Hinduism, and in the sixteenth century set about finding a religious space between the politically strong Muslims and the socially entrenched Hindus. A progression of nine Gurus succeeded Nanak. The tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh gave the Sikhs a distinctive religious and martial identity to distinguish them from others in Punjabi society. The physical markers of this identity were clear and five in number: *kes* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (wooden comb), *kara* (steel bracelet), kirpan (concealed ceremonial dagger) and *kachha* (kind of underwear). Guru Gobind Singh died in 1708, and designated the religious text, the *Adi Granth*, as his successor in perpetuity.⁷

³ Sardar jokes circulate with high frequency in urban India. They mock the intellectual ability of the Sikhs.

⁴ Shinder Purewal, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Harnik Deol, *Religion and nationalism in India : the case of the Punjab* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

⁷ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1997), p.108.

The nineteenth century saw Sikh political power at its pinnacle. Coming from a community that comprised ten percent of then undivided Punjab's population, Sikh monarchs ruled over a short-lived kingdom from 1801 to 1849. The period saw the Anglo-Sikh wars that culminated in British victory in 1849 over Maharaja Duleep Singh (who infamously converted to Christianity in 1853, and became one of Britain's earliest Sikh immigrants).⁸ The British found the Sikhs worthy adversaries: "Seikhs [sic] caught hold of the bayonets of their assailants with their left hands and closing with their adversaries, dealt furious sword blows with their right...This circumstance alone will suffice to demonstrate the rare species of courage possessed by these men."⁹ These early words of virile praise led to a carefully crafted colonial narrative that perpetuated the myth



⁸ Rajiv A Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The politics of faith* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 14.

⁹ General Thackwell, 1851, quoted in Rajiv A Kapur, *op. cit.*, p. 19

of Sikh virility. The British cultivated the Sikh as a “martial race” to man its armies.¹⁰ At the start of the First World War, Sikhs constituted over half of the Indian army.¹¹ During the Indian mutiny of 1857, the Sikhs remained loyal to the British, earning their respect, gratitude and favour.¹²

Recent Sikh history has seen much violence. The 80s saw a demand for Khalistan, an independent Sikh nation coterminous with Indian Punjab. Southall and other expatriate Sikh communities (mostly in Canada) were the home of expatriate separatist ideologues. The movement, much subdued now, remains an issue of bitter contention, far beyond discussion within this thesis. It culminated in twin tragedies. First, in 1984 the Durbar Sahib in Amritsar, the holiest Sikh shrine was occupied by the Indian army. Later in the year, Sikh bodyguards assassinated the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Southall was swept up in the chaos of political extremism and violence, losing in assassinations advocates from both sides of the bitter divide. Things have quieted down since. Councillor Gurchuran Singh of Southall, speaking nineteen years after those troubled times, told me gently, “The Sikh have moved on.”

SOUTHALL

Southall is nine miles west of central London. It comprises the five western most wards of the borough of Ealing. Ealing is one of six boroughs that constitute West London. The borough has a population of little over 300,000 – forty one per cent of which is ethnic minority (non-white).¹³ The six West London boroughs house about 1.4 million residents. Thirty seven percent of these are ethnic

¹⁰ Bernard Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹¹ Rajiv A Kapur, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹² M J Akbar, *India: the siege within: challenges to a nation's unity* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 1996), p.124. “It was good to be a Sikh after the Mutiny”; Sikhs got excellently irrigated and subsidised land from the British. This led many Hindu families to raise their eldest son a Sikh. This case of intra-filial cross-religious dynamics is often cited as a romanticized example of Hindu-Sikh unity in Punjab. The reasons, cynics argue, were mainly economic.

¹³ See Gerd Baumann, *Contesting culture : discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), for a discussion on the term ‘ethnic minority’, and the reluctance of white Europeans to be designated an ‘ethnic identity’. His work is an ethnographic study of race relations in Southall.

minority.¹⁴ Southall has a population of about 70,000 of which over sixty percent is ethnic minority (predominantly of Punjabi origin).¹⁵ Refugees, mainly from Somalia, are the newest residents of Southall. They number about 12,000.¹⁶



Southall is two long bus rides from Central London. I made the journey from Regents Park everyday for two weeks (split over two trips to London). The first leg took me through Anglican, historical, classical and affluent London in the company of white-collared, black-coated young Londoners on their way to begin work early. This bus, the 94, would take me to Shepherd's Bush Green, where I would wait for the 207. This second bus weaved itself slowly through West London. My companions and my sights were strikingly different. London was no longer white nor clean. It is dirty, Ethiopian, Indian, middle Eastern and busy. There are progressively fewer whites down the Uxbridge Road. I became very familiar with the road. It hauled me twice a day through Acton, Ealing and Hanwell, progressing from ethnicity to ethnicity. Sikhs made an appearance only after Ealing. The turbaned men were usually old, reminding me of the old Sikh men who transited quietly through Delhi airport on their way to or from Punjab.

My visit to England in the winter of 2003 was my first to the country. I had also never been to any enclave of India outside India. I came to Southall not knowing what to expect, and with fears of inadequacy and insufficient preparation. But first, a history of the town.

¹⁴ Census statistical abstract from Ealing Borough Council website at <http://www.ealing.gov.uk/council/demographics/census.asp> (15 May 2003).

¹⁵ Draft Prospectus of the Southall International Gateway, August 2001 (London: Southall Regeneration Partnership, 2001), p.2.

¹⁶ Interview with Ash Verma, CEO of Southall Regeneration Partnership, London (January, 2003).



A HISTORY: ENGLISH VILLAGE TO INDUSTRIAL TOWN

*Central Southall. 1896,
1914 and 1940*

Southall first finds mention in English history in 832 AD. For the next thousand years it was a 'typical parish of Middlesex' county – a small farming community where peas, beans and sheep were the main crops. Brick making was Southall's original industry, and one it apparently did well enough at to supply bricks to Buckingham Palace. The town made bricks from 1697 until 1928. The latter years of this period (as Sikh ascendancy was reaching its peak in Punjab) saw Southall rapidly change from idyllic English village to busy industrial town. The Grand and Paddington canals, built at the end of the 18th century provided cheap and swift movement of goods to the river Thames. The Great Western railway line, laid in 1839, brought industry. Together, the canals and the railroad established the circumstances that would dramatically change Southall's demographic profile in the coming years.¹⁷

The industrial revolution saw Southall's population grow from 697 in 1801 to 9,000 in 1901. The years between the two Wars saw the establishment of several factories producing rubber, margarine, gas, aircraft equipment and processed food. For a while, the town boasted the world's largest margarine factory – Otto

¹⁷ RJ Mead, *Southall: 830-1982* (Tiverton, Devon: Maslands, 1983).

Monsteds. It was Danish and closed down in 1929.¹⁸ Trams, horse drawn buses, and the railway added to the industrial bustle. The growing industrial complex initially drew labour from Ireland and Wales. After the second war, it recruited former Polish servicemen. The demand for labour was however insatiable, and led ultimately to the well-built men of rural Punjab in North India.

A PUNJABI REINCARNATION

The first Sikh men from Punjab arrived in Southall in the early 50s.¹⁹ Most of them were Jat (a farming caste of North west India) from rural Punjab. They were generally unskilled and inarticulate in English. Though mostly of farming background, there was also an early trickle of Punjab's urban 'intelligentsia' – clerks, teachers, petty police officials and college graduates.²⁰ The great majority of the immigrants came from two districts in particular, Jullundhar and Hoshiarpur in East Punjab. In 1951, non-white immigrants constituted less than a percent of Southall's 55,896 residents. In 1961, the population had fallen to 52,983, but immigrants from the Indian subcontinent constituted a little over four percent. By 1964, the Punjabi floodgates were wide open. That year Southall had 57,230



Southall Station, London.
20th Jan '68

¹⁸ RJ Mead, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Peter Marsh, *Anatomy of a strike: unions, employers and Punjabi workers in a Southall factory* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1968), p. 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

residents, of which 6,500 (little over eleven percent) were non-white immigrants. More than ninety percent of the 5,500 from India were Sikh.²¹

But why Sikhs? A myth explains their unlikely migration from Punjab to West London. It goes like this: an officer at one of the Southall factories had previously worked in the British Indian army (or police, depending on the version). After India's independence in 1947, one of his non-commissioned officers, a Sikh, looked him up in London and asked for employment. He received it and persuaded the recruitment of his fellow Sikhs. The myth may not be entirely apocryphal. In the early 50s, an officer at Woolf's rubber (Southall's largest and later the very controversial employer of Sikhs) had previously been in contact with a Sikh regiment in the Middle East during World War II. He did employ a Sikh acquaintance looking for work, and on his recommendation 'took on his friends'.²²

The Sikhs were invaluable to Southall's factories. They worked long hours and night shifts. Sixty-hour weeks were the norm. Some worked seven days and seventy-five hours. Their sense of urgency came from their need to send money home to their families, and also from a strong myth of return.²³ Wives and children came later after hopes of returning to Punjab gradually eroded. The Sikh men were filling a gap in labour supply, created by native workers' distaste and unwillingness to perform work of an unpleasant nature. It was a familiar immigrant story, and the Sikhs were in a predictable procession that the Welsh, Irish and Polish had already made through Southall.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²² GS Aurora, *The new frontiersmen; a sociological study of Indian immigrants in the United Kingdom* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967), p. 35. Aurora has designated his area of study with a pseudonym, Greenend (for unexplained reasons). However, it is assuredly Southall because another contemporary researcher, Peter Marsh referred extensively to Aurora's PhD research in Southall. Besides, the places, factories and institutions are all the same in name.

²³ V Robinson, "The Development of South Asian Settlements in Britain and the Myth of Return" in *Ethnic Segregation in Cities*, edited by C. Peach, V. Robinson and S. Smith (London: Croom Helm, 1981). He says, "...although many groups will never return...(they) continue to behave as if they would."

In the early 50s, the men lived in Aldgate in east London. The commute was long, and it made sense moving to Southall. But few landlords were willing to rent to the dark-skinned, turbaned men who spoke no English. The Punjabi's were forced to pool their capital and buy homes for themselves. Expectedly, several of them shared these houses and living conditions were very unpleasant.

You cannot imagine how barbarously we lived in those days. The front room had three beds, two of them double. The back room had a similar number of beds. The large front room on the first floor had four beds. The two other bedrooms on the same floors have five beds. The number of people living there fluctuated between twenty and twenty-five. Some of the beds during the day were used by the night shift workers and night by the night worker.²⁴

Matters came to a head in the 60s, and the local press screamed its opposition – COLOURED COMMUNITY MUST BE THINNED OUT.²⁵ It was a sentiment soon transmogrified into antipathy for the Punjabis. In conservative London of the 60's, the mainstream's publicly adopted anti-immigrant attitude was uninhibitedly guiltless and strong. COMPLETE BAN ON IMMIGRATION TO SOUTHALL IS NEEDED announced a headline.²⁶ Press reports of the time reveal how the natives reacted to the incoming Punjabis. Most of it was not pleasant.

An angry resident explained to a reporter, in 1963: "I have no objection to any coloured men coming over here to university, so that they can go home and teach their fellows how to improve."²⁷ Anti-Punjabi invective came supported by powerful arguments. At a Council meeting in August '63, the Mayor heard this shouted at him: "A few years ago there were whites in India, and they didn't want us. Now they're here, and we don't want them either. Lets get rid of them before

²⁴ GS Aurora, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁵ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 17 August, 1963.

²⁶ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 11 January, 1964.

²⁷ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 17 August, 1963.

there is any more trouble.”²⁸ The Labour MP, George Pargiter in 1964 summed up the mainstream attitude: “I feel that Sikh parents should encourage their children to give up their turbans, their religion and their dietary laws. If they refuse to integrate then we must be tough.”²⁹ Others provided reasons for their disgust: “the trouble sprang not from white fighting white, but black fighting black. We got them fighting every night. We’re just about sick of it.”³⁰

But the violence had already turned inter-racial. The first of several race riots occurred in September 1958.³¹ The aggressors were white youth. The local newspaper was graphic in its description: “...an estimated gang of two hundred gathered outside the Woolf Rubber Factory ...waiting for the coloured workers to change shifts. The word had previously been passed around and rioters from Hayes, Greenford, Northolt, Willesden, Ealing and Hanwell gathered with a collection of offensive weapons which ranged from broken bottles and coshes to wood covered with barbed wire.” The coloureds in contrast were allegedly ‘a peacable lot’.³²

That changed though in the late 70s. Major riots occurred in 1976, ’79 and ’81. Now, Punjabi youth retaliated violently against skinheads and Police (perceived to belong to the same institutionally racist establishment).³³ Violence declined as Southall turned into a non-white majority neighbourhood, and the extreme right of Britain’s political spectrum lost local support and muscle power. By 1966, the British equivalent of white flight had seen a quarter of central Southall’s population turn non-white and by 1971 this was up to half.³⁴ This period also saw the

²⁸ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 31 August, 1963

²⁹ *Southall: the Birth of a Black Community* (London: Institute of Race Relations; Southall Rights, 1981), p.40.

³⁰ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 31 August, 1963

³¹ *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 10 September, 1958.

³² *West Middlesex Gazette* – Southall edition, 13 September, 1958.

³³ William H. Harlan, “Changes in the Sikh Community of Southall, London, 1963-1985” in *Punjab in Perspective: Proceedings of the Research Committee on Punjab Conference, 1987*, eds. Surjit Dulai and Arthur Helweg (East Lansing, Michigan: Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University, 1991), pp. 135-162.

³⁴ *Southall: the Birth of a Black Community* (London: Institute of Race Relations; Southall Rights,

migration of Punjabis and Gujaratis from East Africa. Immigration laws in Kenya forced British passport-holding Indians to leave in 1967. Adi Amin did the same in Uganda in 1972.³⁵ By 1981, Southall had a population of over 82,000 of which sixty five percent were of Asian origin.³⁶ By then also, two of its five wards – Northcote and Glebe, had the highest residential densities of any in Britain.³⁷

The British state was seen doing very little to assist the unwanted strangers. Local political and socio-religious organisations served as surrogate providers of social welfare. Punjabi leftists founded the Indian Workers Association (IWA) in 1957. It is the progenitor of Punjabi political activity in Southall. It served initially to fulfill cultural and welfare objectives. Incoming migrants usually made it their first stop on arriving. Here, they found accommodation, contacts, and employment leads. Later the IWA would actively pursue union organisation efforts – particularly at the Woolf Rubber factory that in 1960 employed forty percent of Southall's Sikhs, and in 1965 had ninety percent of its unskilled as Sikh. The IWA also campaigned against bussing of Punjabi school children in the 70s, when the State had limited every school to a 33 percent cap on immigrant children. At its peak, 2,500 children were being bussed out of the town.³⁸

Religious Sikh organisations play an important role in Southall. A bonding known as 'biradri' – a fraternal relationship between members of the same caste or village provides very secure social security. Punjabi village and extended filial networks often determine social relationships here. Southall has two main Sikh followings – the Singh Sabha, and the Ramgarhia. The former has its origins in a nineteenth century movement that sought to defend Sikh identity from Christian

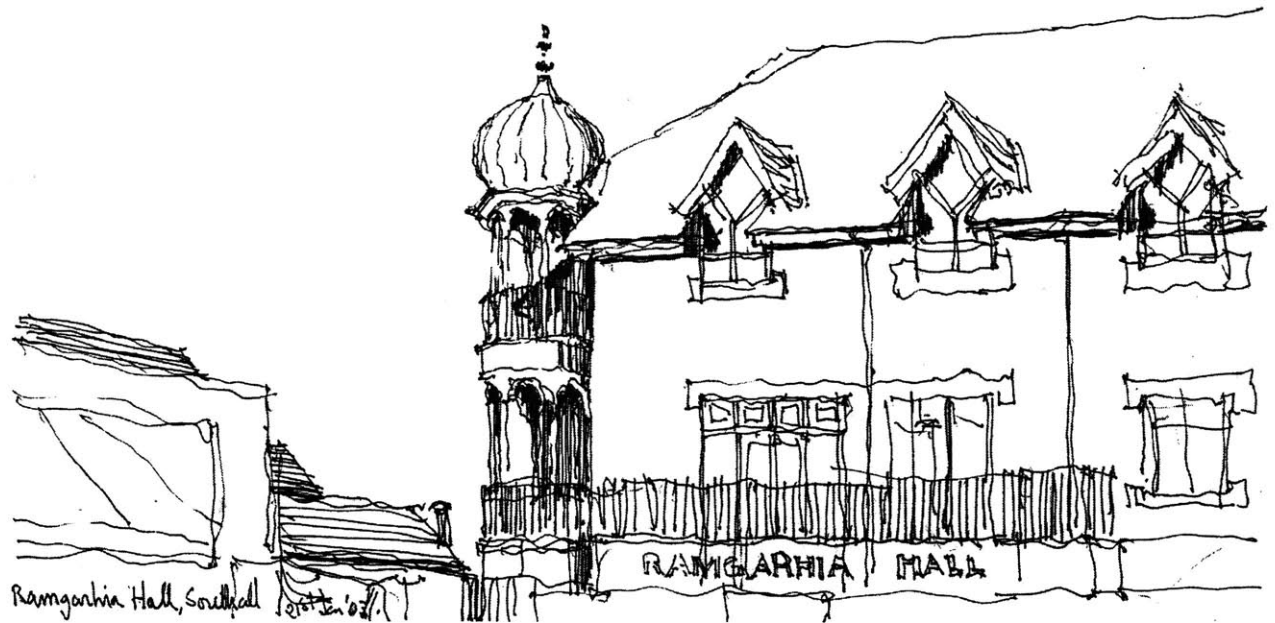
1981), p.40-42.

³⁵ *Southall: the Birth of a Black Community* (London: Institute of Race Relations; Southall Rights, 1981), p.30.

³⁶ RJ Mead, *op. cit.*, p.81.

³⁷ William H. Harlan, *op.cit.*

³⁸ *Southall: the Birth of a Black Community* (London: Institute of Race Relations; Southall Rights, 1981), pp.31-32.



missionaries and Hindu proselytisers.³⁹ The latter draws itself from an artisan caste that comes from Amritsar. The Ramgarhias in Southall are mainly the Sikhs that migrated from East Africa.⁴⁰

Southall's Punjabis are very active politically. Southall elected its first Punjabi councilor to the Ealing Council in 1967. Piara Singh Khabra was elected to the House of Commons in 1992. He was one of the union organisers at Woolf in the 60s. He is the current President of the IWA, and also Britain's oldest MP.⁴¹ In 2003, twenty of Ealing's 69 councillors were Asian.⁴² Councilor Gurchuran Singh of Southall is Ealing's deputy Mayor (Southall merged with the Ealing borough in 1965, and no longer has its own Mayor).⁴³ I met him on a January afternoon in his

³⁹ Harnik Deol, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-73.

⁴⁰ Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh diaspora : the search for statehood* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1999). p. 50. The Ramgarhias were considered a pro-India group during the days of Khalistani struggle.

⁴¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/2072144.stm (15 May 2003)

⁴² Website of the Ealing Council at <http://elis.ealing.gov.uk/webpages/councillors.htm> (15 May 2003).

⁴³ RJ Mead, *op. cit.*, p.90.

home. The hour I spent with him provided a glimpse into the domestic life of a socio-culturally compartmentalised individual. The bilingual message in English and Punjabi on Councilor Singh's answering machine hinted at what lay ahead. He picked me up from the Vishwa Hindu Kendra, in central Southall, in a borrowed grey Mercedes. His own, white, was not available. A rack in the lobby of his ground floor house carried several shoes. I took off my own before walking on his home's deep blue carpets. He asked his wife, in Punjabi, to make tea. On the television played a Rajesh Khanna film (an extraordinarily popular Indian actor of the 70s). Above the television was a small, framed photograph of the turbaned Mr. Singh with Tony Blair, both wearing toothy politician smiles. Singh settled down to give me a quick run through of Southall's political dynamics. He was often interrupted on the phone. His tone and language – either good-humoured conspiratorial Punjabi or cold English, easily identified the ethnicity of the caller.

Most Asians in Britain support Labour. The Punjabi's of Southall do so overwhelmingly. They see the party as progressive and liberal. However, Gujaratis and Muslims at times lean towards the Conservatives. Many individuals still profess preferences for Indian political parties. However, that is more hobby and less any reflection of politics in Southall. Next, Singh discussed racial politics and identity. His description explained why in the early literature, the Sikhs of Britain were referred to as Black.⁴⁴ In the 70s, all non-white groups chose to be designated Black. Any attempt to find and advertise identity different from this umbrella identity undermined the fight against white and institutional racism. In the 80s, identities were refined. Asians were now different from Blacks. In the 90's further breakdown of identity occurred – British Indians and British Muslims were new labels applied to the various groups from South Asia. Singh finds that this subdivision of an all-encompassing identity reflects greater confidence in the immigrant community that removes the inhibitions of displaying their ethnic and cultural

⁴⁴ For instance the title, *Southall: the Birth of a Black Community* (London: Institute of Race Relations; Southall Rights, 1981).

origins. On my inquiry regarding White-Punjabi relations in Southall (of which there are still a few; Singh's neighbours for example), Singh was matter-of-fact. Relations with Whites are cold and cordial. Most of them are old, and are completely absent in local schools. They do not invite the Punjabis home and neither do the Punjabis. Social interactions are usually restricted to street pleasantries. RJ Meads, a local historian writing in 1982 talks about the sense of loss that many of the natives experienced.

The whole of Southall has become very badly run down. Litter is everywhere...gone are most front gardens, these have made way for cars to park. South Road which used to be one of the best, is now deplorable. Most of the blame for the town's neglect was laid at the feet of the town's new residents. They were to blame because they did not know how to live in a town. In fact, the area's whole decline was mainly because of residents failing to take in interest in the town's affair.⁴⁵

Southall is the new home of about 12,000 Somalis. They are the African twist in this Punjabi tale. Some Punjabi's are vocal in their displeasure at this new influx. Channi Singh is one of them. Channi was not happy to see me when I knocked on his door. I was to have called to confirm my appointment, and I had not. I reached his house on St. Joseph's drive on a January afternoon. Outside, was parked his Mercedes – CHNI 46B. His front yard like most others in residential Southall was bare and abandoned, and served as parking. The yards rarely had grass and gave the

*South Road,
2003 and 1936*



⁴⁵ RJ Mead, *op. cit.*, pp. 81, 89.



*Trinity Road,
2003 and 1930*

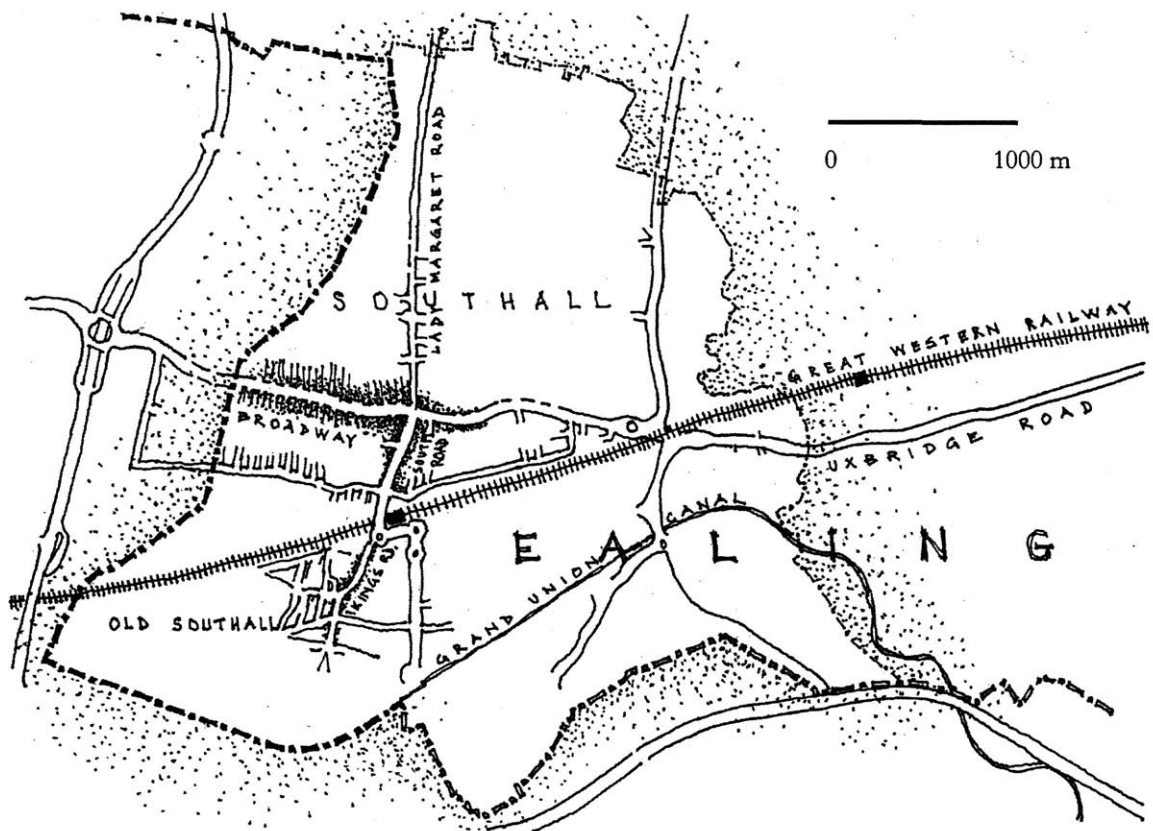
residential streets a drab, unlivd and inhospitable environment. This was incongruously unlike the buzz and energy of Broadway and South road. Channi is from Jalandhar in Punjab. He has a Masters in English literature from there. Channi used to be a famous man in Southall. He pioneered the Bhangra music movement in the UK in the 70s. His band, Alaap, was the first British bhangra act (his business card also describes him as a Bollywood music director). Channi's directs his annoyance not so much at the Somalis as at the British government. He considers its refugee housing policy as openly racist. Southall is seen as an ethnic minority ghetto that would be a suitable dumping ground for non-white strangers. Also incredibly, as both groups are non-white immigrants they would find it easy to get along. Channi complained that non-white asylum seekers would never be accommodated in virgin white central London.

Britain's oldest MP, Piara Singh Khabra of Southall does little to ease the antagonisms. He infamously claimed in a September 2002 radio interview that Somali youth were responsible for increasing crime levels in Southall. If pushed further, Asians, he warned, would take the law into their own hands.⁴⁶ Community workers were aghast and argued that the Somalis were a much marginalised

⁴⁶ *The Independent* (London), September 4, 2002.

community in Southall. Regardless, some Asians resent the economic and spatial threat that this fresh immigrant group brings. It is all too familiar a story.

Notwithstanding Channi's criticisms, the British and London governments are concerned about his Punjabi ghetto. The London government has partly funded the Southall Regeneration Partnership. This public-private endeavour aims to encourage economic regeneration, and by 2010 make Southall 'an international gateway for excellence in multiculturalism and commercial development'.⁴⁷ Ash Verma, a middle aged second generation Punjabi and British civil servant leads the organisation. Ash was very helpful, hospitable and directly responsible for arranging most of my meetings and interviews in Southall. I returned the favour as best as I could. We went to an Indian restaurant in Harvard Square when he was in Boston for a business conference. But, we waited for an hour to be seated. When we did eat, the food was not as good as Southall's.



⁴⁷ Draft Prospectus of the Southall International Gateway, August 2001 (London: Southall Regeneration Partnership, 2001), p.2.

THE STREETS

Southall has a thriving retail economy, of which Broadway is the celebrated core. Food, clothes, jewelry and music predominate here. The street about 45 feet wide is flanked first by pavements of varying widths and then by two-storied buildings. The street has remained unchanged in scale since first built late in the 19th century. Its character though has 'changed beyond all recognition.'⁴⁸ All the shops, except for banks and chain drugstores are owned or operated by South Asians. Most of them sell Indian clothes, Indian music, Indian jewelry, and Indian food. There are more than 400 such.⁴⁹ Their shop displays are windows into a world inhabited by female Indian mannequins, halogen drenched gold, sitars and tablas, and fresh halal mutton. On the streets, customers vie for space with the jalebi maker, the tailor, the CD seller, the green grocer, the



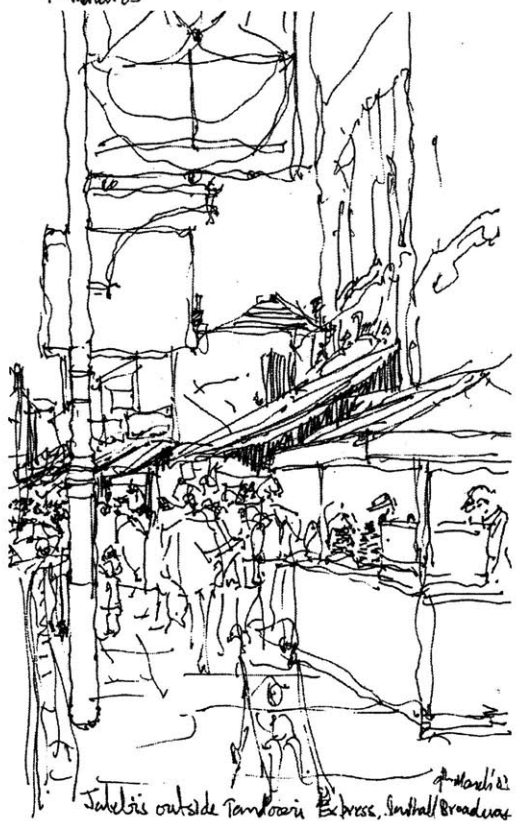
Southall Broadway 22nd Jan '03

⁴⁸ Jonathan Oates, *Images of England: Southall* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2001), p.8 (Introduction).

⁴⁹ From a quick count of Southall's map of retail businesses (Welwyn Garden city: Experian, 2003).



Bina Mincala Shopwindow
Southall
9th March '03



Tanaka's outside Pantheon Express, Southall/Broadway
9th March '03

dry grocer, the lottery ticket seller, the leather wallet seller, the suitcase seller and the leather belt seller. These street traders operate in a sophisticated rental market that sees street spots exchange hands frequently and expensively.

Broadway wakes up at eleven. I would arrive at nine to see downed shutters, and litter from the previous day of business (at least two business owners informed me, and not with pretend pride that Southall conducted more retail business than Oxford Street). South Asian faces predominate. There are some Somalis, too. White British faces are rare (this early only the trash collectors of Ealing Council are visible). I found it very familiar. I spoke my rusty and unpractised Hindi. I was spoken back to in Punjabi, the only language spoken on the streets, which I understand sufficiently well to follow a conversation. When unable, I feigned my understanding with nods.

South Road is not like Broadway. It heads off Broadway on the south towards Southall's railway station. Along with several retail outlets, it is also home to local service professionals – travel agents, dentists, solicitors, accountants, and Chinese herbal chemists. The street also has the Himalaya Palace, an Indian cinema hall. This is a listed heritage building, and apparently the only one in the United Kingdom with a Chinese façade.⁵⁰ Like Broadway, two storied buildings flank South Road too. The pavement however is narrower and street trading quieter.

⁵⁰ Promotional document, *Changing London: An historic city for a Modern world* (English Heritage, 2002), p. 19.



The street used to be residential, and its southern end is still in transition. Iqra Books illustrates the trend to convert residential to commercial (sketch on the following page). The retail bookstore of religious Islamic books occupies the ground floor of a two-story 4-unit residential building. It has done away with the bay window to accommodate an entrance and display window. The adjoining unit, office space for a professional retains its bay window. Further down the street is Southall railway station – one of few places that have official signs in the Punjabi script, Gurumukhi. En route South Street passes by the Glassy Junction, a Punjabi pub that Ash Verma considers the most expensive real estate in Southall, and worth upwards of a million pounds.

Across the tracks, South Road leads into Old Southall. The atmosphere, all Indian still, is more reserved and quiet. The Southall Manor built in 1587 on the Green epitomises the staid old character on the other sides of the tracks.⁵¹ Western Street is the heart of Old Southall's retail activity. Unfortunately, I did not spend

⁵¹ Johnathan Oates, *op. cit.*, p.20



TORA Books on South Road, Southall. 11th March '03



Vishwa Hindu Kendra
Southall, Jan. 22nd '03.

enough time here to make and articulate my observations with any confidence. Consequently, I will say very little. All except one of my documented cases that follow are from 'new' Southall – South Road and Broadway.

Physical adaptations, ones that are plainly obvious, are mainly religious in nature. The Holy Trinity Hall on Lady Margaret Road morphed itself into the temple of the Vishwa Hindu Kendra in 1979 by adding stylised Hindu shikhars on the façade.⁵² New construction when religious in nature also displays cultural references. The new Singh Sabha Gurudwara (Sikh place of worship) on Havelock Road is of such ambitious proportions that it deceived my sketch paper into lopping off its bulbous dome. It opened on 30 March, 2003 having consumed 17 million charitable Sikh pounds on its construction. The press described it variously as

⁵² Brij Mohan Gupta interview (Secretary, Vishwa Hindu Kendra), January 2003.



the largest Gurudwara outside India, or the largest in Europe. It does utilise a very European Christian element – that of the stained glass window. The Ramgarhia Hall on Broadway also displays token reference to the Sikh ribbed dome, as do the old Singh Sabha gurudwara on Park Avenue, and the Miri Piri gurudwara on Broadway.

On the streets, Sunday afternoons are best. The boys come out in their loud cars, and the girls come out in their silk *salwars* (loose trouser-like bottom wear from North India). The *dhols* (large Punjabi drums) of remixed British bhangra boom from within cars, and from each of twenty seven music stores on Broadway. On the pavement, Punjabi boys and girls fight for space with street traders and weekend daytrip shoppers. The latter come in insatiable hordes, looking for deals that only Southall can provide. The town has very successfully positioned itself to serve an Asian market that is pan-English and European. Consequently, it presides over a weekend economy. However, not all the weekend trade is of non-Southallers. The



Saturday market off High street (the maps on the previous pages indicate an unchanged location since the 19th century) is noisy and fully local. Punjabi traders and white farmers indulge in a multi-lingual shout feast. The Punjabis sell cheap jewelry and fabric. The farmers sell fresh vegetables and fruit, eggs and dairy products. The buyers are all Asian.

Harbans Lal Shukla of the Southall chamber of Commerce gave me a gist of Southall's economy. His account and my reproduction of it are necessarily anecdotal. His office is in the Manor on the Greens, in old Southall. He is in his late 60s and stocky. He walks with the swaying walk typical of portly old Indians, exaggerated in London by layers of warm clothing. He is a Punjabi, educated in soil mechanics in Mumbai. He migrated there from Lahore in 1947. In 1965 he moved again, this time to England. Shukla is the honorary secretary of Southall Chamber of Commerce. His office has the decaying feel an old accountant's office in old Mumbai. On a wall, Queen Elizabeth II gazes blankly out the window down Kings Street.

Shukla spoke slowly and I distilled the essence quickly, sometimes impatiently. Industry is no longer as important as it was in the 60s and 70s. Southall is now all

about retail – food, clothing, and jewelry. Its customer base, almost exclusively Asian, is drawn from all of the United Kingdom and Europe – “not more than two shops will be sustained if only local Southallers shop here.” Heathrow airport is now the town’s largest employer. Ten thousand of its residents work there, mostly in the unskilled low-paid jobs (“at least they receive free trips to India”). Retail property ownership is concentrated in a few hands, all Asian – “four or five own most of Broadway.” Immigrants from Afghanistan rent and operate many of the smaller businesses. The first of the now ubiquitous ‘Cash and Carry’ grocers appeared in 1969. Sunrise Radio, “Britain’s largest Asian radio station”⁵³ started broadcasting in the mid-eighties. Jewelers established themselves in the early seventies, when the price of gold suddenly doubled. The Indians from Kenya and Uganda arrived in the late sixties – “they were a privileged class who ruled East Africa by proxy.” Young Punjabis increasingly frequent the pubs and branded stores of Ealing, toward the east. They don’t find a Western environment in Southall. Village affinities from Punjab plague the politics of Southall.



⁵³ This is the slogan by which the radio station advertises itself.

Suthaal, as this Punjabi acquisition is referred to on its streets, is almost fifty years old. It is no accident that second generation Indians ran the majority of businesses that I documented. The seven cases that follow will look at the construction of business identity at a finer individual scale.

SHAKEER ADAM'S PAVEMENT CD STORE.

Shakeer Adam is 17 years old. His family is originally from Kutchh, an arid salt marsh in the western Indian state of Gujarat, and subsequently from Kenya in East Africa. Shakeer was born and brought up in England. He has never been to India

or Africa. His father however (a wholesale jeweler), visits India every fortnight on work. Shakeer sells CDs of British bhangra and soundtracks of Hindi movies on Broadway. His outdoor tabletop music shop, protected by a red-and-white striped awning, sits on a six by ten foot strip of pavement outside a butcher's shop, rented from the butcher. Underneath his blue-cloth clad table hide two speakers that boom with the remixed vigour of British bhangra. Shakeer claimed there were 27 music shops on the Broadway. Individually they compete for a share of the bhangra street beat that sees the release of at least three new CDs every week. Collectively they make the walk down Broadway loud and pleasantly cacophonous.



Shakeer, like most other second-generation Suthallers, spoke in the peculiar West London working class dialect that terminated each sentence with a long question marked 'yeah'. I

bought two CDs of remixed Bhangra from Shakeer on a Sunday afternoon in March, and immediately asked to interview him. But Sunday afternoon is busy and lucrative even in the winter, and he asked me to come back on Tuesday. On Mondays he keeps his shop closed. On other days, he works from eleven until seven.

Shakeer was unexpectedly forthcoming. Other street traders, most of who were recent immigrants were wary of speaking to me, perhaps insecure in their legal status, or unsure of my motives. But Shakeer was an old hand and the assured son of a local businessman. In a rushed 20-minute conversation he revealed to me his informed understanding of Broadway's street trading property market.

Shakeer has rented his space for about a year. He pays 1200 pounds rent every month for about 60 square feet of pavement space. His landlord is the butcher outside whose shop Shakeer conducts his business. The butcher has a street-trading license given by the Ealing council. Marked clearly on the pavement in red brick pavers are the boundaries within which the butcher is allowed to conduct street business. It is this space that the butcher rents out to Shakeer, and whose boundaries Shakeer conscientiously does not violate. However, not every red-brick defined space on Broadway has been used. Premises with more than three metres of pavement width in front, receive an automatic one metre deep street license. The red bricks arrange themselves accordingly. But when a bank or another established business occupies the premises then the street spot is expectedly left unused.

In addition to the rental transaction, there is also a commodity market for street trading spots. Shakeer paid 1,500 pounds of goodwill money to buy the rights to this space from the previous renter. He also then deposited 2,000 pounds with the butcher. When in turn Shakeer leaves, he will receive goodwill money to sell his rights (now up to a dizzying 6,000 pounds) and the butcher will return his 2,000 pounds.



Shakeer not surprisingly serves the young local Punjabi Southall population. There are no design references he makes with the functional striped awning, the blue table cloth, and hand-scrawled price placards. His only and very loud advertising are the two reverberating not-very-good-quality speakers under his table. He hinted at earning enough to pay his rent (I paid 10 pounds for 2 CDs). Most of his annual business is conducted in a one-month period in summer.

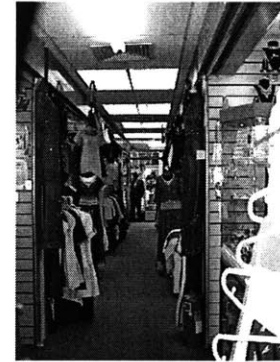
PALIKA BAZAAR

Palika Bazaar is a department store on Broadway. It occupies the ground floor bays of two adjacent premises. Within are located smaller shops, most of which sell clothes. Palika Bazaar is representative of two significant Southall phenomena. First, it illustrates the trend to subdivide retail space on Broadway in a peculiarly Southall manner. Second, it conceals a story of symbolic authenticity within its name.

Retail space on Southall's Broadway is scarce and expensive. Some property



owners have evolved a way to increase the supply of retail space by subdividing their premises and offering it to small businesses. The design typology is simple – a doubly loaded corridor flanked by small and shallow stores. The stores are usually generic and non-specialised – fabrics, wallets and belts. They do not suffer for a lack of advertised presence on the street façade. Palika Bazaar belongs to this school but with increased complexity. Two adjacent bays allow it two central corridors that loop to meet at the rear. Also at the rear is an additional entrance – but with a single door, unlike the twin entrances in the front. The rear entrance is conveniently located across from Southall’s only multi-story parking structure. To sustain the street’s weekend economy, parking spots are crucial. The 270 spaces here are considered very inadequate.



Palika Bazaar loosely translates from Hindi into ‘market constructed by the city government’. However, one market in Delhi has usurped the iconic significance of the name for itself. It is an underground market constructed by the city of Delhi, known for the small shops that sell electronics and fabrics. Southall’s Palika Bazaar refers directly to that market. This familiar and recognisable symbol advertises the store’s lineage, and authenticates the products it sells by evoking memories and images of the commercial activity that is associated with ‘Palika Bazaar’.

Southall’s Palika Bazaar is not the only clone. An online search returns several of them – all Indian grocers located in various cities of the United States. Nor is Palika Bazaar the only culturally cross-referenced market in Southall. Meena Bazaar and Chandi Chowk (both historical markets in the old city of Delhi) are also on busy Broadway. Stores like Palika Bazaar lie on the progression of establishing a business presence in Southall – commencing with street-trading like Shakeer Adam, progressing then to small time renter in a store like Palika Bazaar, to eventually owning or renting a full retail space. This sequence is familiar to the entrepreneurial Punjabis.



Namaskar, Southall Broadway 11th March '03

NAMASKAR

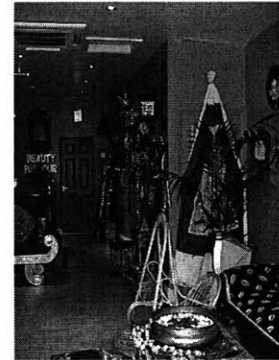
Namaskar is an unlikely store on Broadway. It stocks and sells exotic artifacts imported from India. Unlikely, because Southall with its overwhelmingly Indian population should not be swayed by the exoticness of India, and surely not succumb to buy it. Yet Namaskar survives, situated at the western end of Broadway's loud retail procession of food, fabric and music. Ruma Poppat is the proprietor of Namaskar (a greeting in Sanskrit and Hindi). She is a Gujarati in her early twenties. Her family migrated to England twenty years ago. Her mother operated a beauty salon for eight years in the same premises (Shingar, still advertised on the shop front). Ruma shunted the salon and her mother down to the basement a few months ago, and opened Namsakar for business. However, she still relies on the salon's reputation. The shop sign announces with parental pride – 'SHINGAR OFFERS NAMASKAR'.

Ruma may not be the most experienced or knowledgeable business owner in Southall. She does, however own the second-generation business perspective. Her point of view (generalised to other like her) is increasingly centralised in Southall's sociology as the neighbourhood both ages and becomes younger, and gains influence and affluence. England born offspring now manage many of the businesses. Ruma has observed an evolving trend that has grown out of this transition. The offspring are more concerned about store aesthetics. They have both the capital, and a contextual sense of chic. Their parents on the other hand were pre-occupied with functionality. They lacked both capital, and an interest in mainstream 'contemporary' styling. Ruma spent five thousand pounds on



improving her shop front – an amount her parents would never have, and for a purpose they would never have.

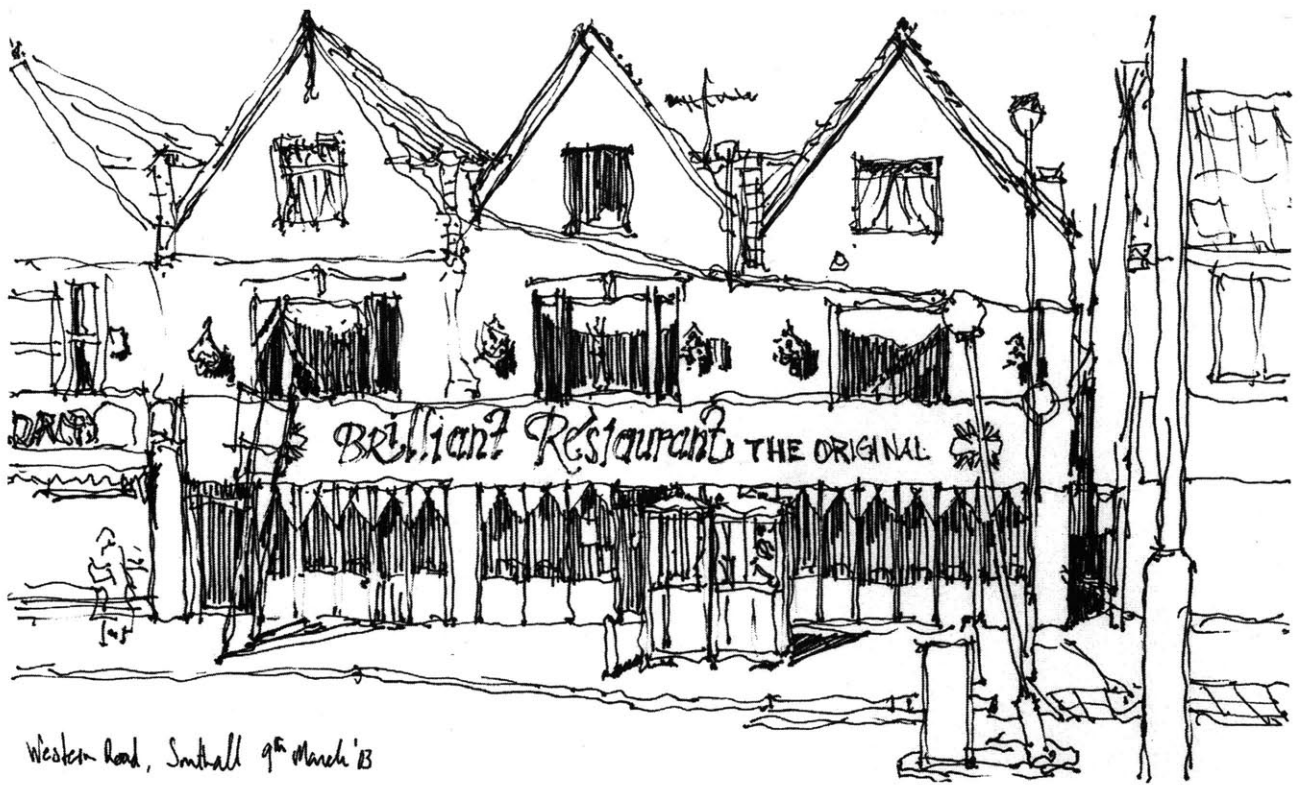
Except for the British voice, Ruma has the demeanour of a young Mumbai girl. She visits there often – three to four times a year to procure products for her business. She lapses into domestic Hindi to ask her maid for tablets to kill her headache. To her enquiring mother she speaks in Gujarati. Talvin Singh, a British Punjabi fusion musician, plays from her speakers. CDs of Hindi film soundtracks lie scattered near the player. Bright orange walls dominate the décor in her shop. They provided the dramatic setting for the display of her ornate artifacts – cushions, oxidised silver work, lacquered tables, handicrafts and furniture. Ruma designed the store. Her brief – ‘my house looks like this’.



Further questioning uncovers Ruma’s economic determinants. Namaskar projects an image of India that makes it attractive to its targeted customers who are ‘affluent South Asian immigrants with an evolved design sensibility’. She does not expect the local resident to frequent her shop. She believes her business would do much better if located in Central London. Eventually, she hopes to serve the white mainstream market (not at all at present). On my question of the deliberateness of an overall Southall identity, Ruma is very clear. Southall has not evolved an identity though any careful, conscious or informed deliberateness – ‘People don’t care’. Her tone while speaking of Southall, its residents and its businesses betrays a disdain. ‘Some girls here marry at sixteen. People have not evolved after they came to London. India has moved along, but Southall has not’. Apparently, the police come out in force when Pakistan and India play each other at cricket. Police helicopters circle overhead on most nights. Southall is unsafe, and is considered a ghetto – “No one told you that, na? I come at nine and leave at six, and don’t care what happens before or after.” Ruma no longer lives in Ealing, but in Harrow.

BRILLIANT RESTAURANT

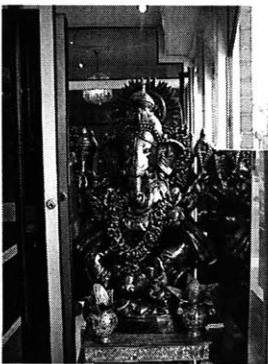
Kewal Anand is bald, portly and in his 60s. He and his younger brother Gulu, own Brilliant Restaurant on Western Road in Old Southall. Anand is Punjabi,



Hindu, Kenyan and British. His father migrated to Kenya from Punjab when Kewal was still very young. In 1957, the family established an Indian restaurant in Nairobi – Kashmir Paradise. It was soon renamed Brilliant to sidestep an awkward legal situation. Kenyan immigration laws forced the family (British passport holders) to move to Britain in the early 70s. Anand was not stingy in expressing his gratitude for the British who allowed him residence. His family must have been one of the lucky ones. Initially, only 1,500 British passport holding Indian families from Africa were allowed a year to enter their own country. The literature on this racially devalued British passport is extensive.⁵⁴



On the other hand, there is bitterness against Indians straight from India. “They don’t consider us Indian,” Anand says. “I am Hindu and I speak Hindi,” he adds in deliberate Hindi. The only discernible direct cultural references are at his entrance – twin references to a transcontinental past. Standing proud in the left hand corner of the entrance lobby are two wooden Masai warriors, each six feet tall.

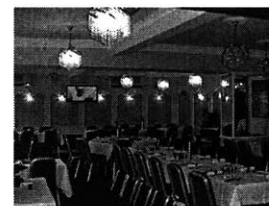


⁵⁴ For a quick overview see Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Ugandan Asians come to Britain* (London: Francis Pinter, 1973).

On the right, sits with tranquil calm a brass statue of Ganesh, the elephant headed Hindu God. Anand's tone was one of offended pride when speaking about his Kenyan origins. The Masai couple is his assertive stand against the perceived derision of his Indian past diluted by an East African sojourn.

After closing down in Nairobi, Brilliant was re-established in Southall in 1975. It seated 36, almost all of who would be East African Indians. In five years, the restaurant expanded by a bay and grew to seat 80. His clientele grew to include about 15 percent white British. They brought about a change in the menu. He introduced 'chicken off the bone' dishes to remove the inconvenience of handling the bone. Forks and knives were now meaningful. In 1992, Brilliant expanded yet again to its present 236-cover size. This included a 120-seat banquet hall on the upper floor.

Except for the twin and independent cultural references at his front door, the restaurant appears to be devoid of all obvious cultural imagery. The glazing outside and the paneling inside have a repetitive peak pattern. But that seems to echo the street elevation of the sloping roofs more than any Indian or Kenyan archway. Anand explains, "There is no gimmickry in this restaurant – no Laila Majnu's on the walls" (reference to two mythical lovers of Punjab). "I have my reputation, and people come for that. My prices are too high for local Southall residents. Someone in Central London will know where Brilliant is, but the man on Broadway will not." Some Indian restaurants in India have a Indian-wedding rented-furniture feel to them. Brilliant is one of them. The ubiquitous tubular aluminium stackable chairs are his dominant design feature.



On his walls hang stamps of approval – the royal English and the popular Indian. One photograph shows Prince Charles visiting Brilliant. Another, suitably distant on a far away wall, shows Shah Rukh Khan, a big Indian film star eating at Brilliant. The restaurant's brochure announces, "We also have a Royal Seal of Approval and are frequented by many VIPs and film stars." His waiters are 'Nepali boys'. His head waiter had recently come from Delhi. I chatted about the city's



new metro while waiting for Anand to meet me. The restaurant's main chef is from Pakistan. Anand does not employ native English. Indian film music, ubiquitous in any kind of Indian street business plays over the music system. On a previous day Ash Verma had brought me here for lunch. I had had Cobra, an Indian beer that is unknown in India. Later, I discovered that Cobra is an Indian beer brewed in Britain by a British Indian beer manufacturer.

Brilliant does very little to make itself appear physically attractive. It has an established reputation, a regular client pool, and the fortunate absence of cutthroat competition. Its lack of Indian cultural references and imagery is even more striking given that forty percent of its customers are White English. Presumably, it relies on

the larger image of Southall to attain Indian credibility, and hence need not do a lot on its own. These positive externalities of Southall prevent even fully mainstream serving businesses from moving out. The ethnic neighbourhood is a tourist destination within the city and abandoning that is suicidal for many businesses that project themselves as 'ethnic'. Besides, property is cheaper here. Ethnic restaurants outside of an ethnic neighbourhood need to do more individually to appear attractive to their customers. Indian restaurants in Central London do exactly that. I will discuss them in my final chapter.

GUPTA CHAAT HOUSE

Brij Mohan Gupta came to London in 1966 with three pounds (the maximum allowed by the Indian government then). He owns Gupta Chaat House on Broadway. It opened for business in 1974 and serves chaat – a north Indian, spicy, quick-served street food. He is currently studying towards a PhD in International



*Chaat House, Southall Broadway
10th March '03*

Relations at Nottingham University. His research, for reasons I did not understand has him interested on the notion of global cities. He showed me his copy of Saskia Sassen, and other books that I had not seen or heard of before. The apparent similarities in our research endeared me to him. We now shared a common academic interest. I was keen to get started, for other reasons though. Gupta is the General Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Kendra – the Hindu temple on Lady Margaret Street, just off Broadway. I hurried through my questions of physical identity, eager to pose the juicy religious ones.

The Chaat house shares its plan layout with several other low-end eating-places in Southall. Gupta will not agree with my inclusion of his restaurant in this category – “the Chaat House is the focus of Broadway”. I found it difficult to believe. The low-end restaurants all belong to the genre of a north Indian sweet shop. They have a long glazed food display on the right, behind which the serving staff serves. On the left, perhaps wrapping around the display on the right, is seating. The layout suits a deep narrow shop, and most of Broadways retail spaces are exactly that.

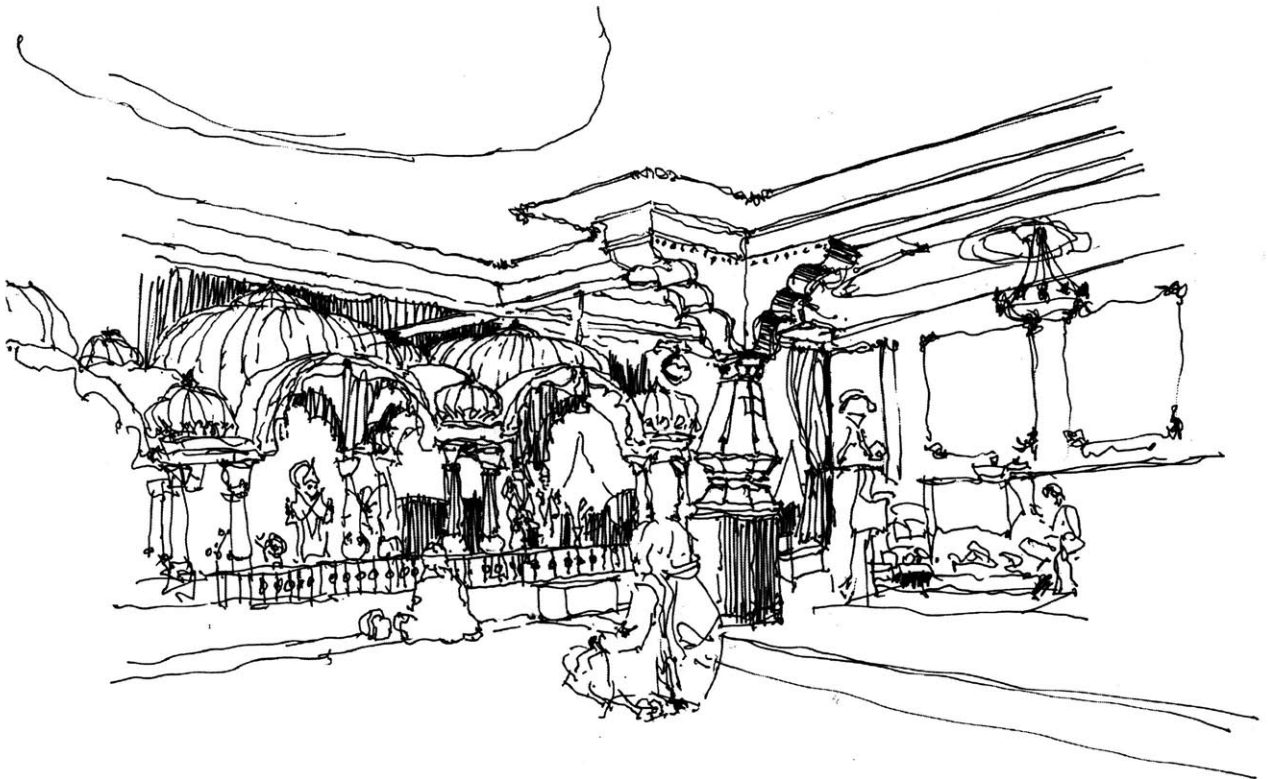


Gupta intended the Chaat House to look ‘Asian’, to show ‘cultural aspects of Indian heritage’. However, the design references are token and not obvious. It has one interior archway of medieval Indian origins. A relief image of a scene from the Gita hangs framed on the rear wall. Cushion covers pose as wall hangings under the incongruous minimalist light fixtures on the right wall. A blue miniature wooden doorway, perhaps from rural Rajasthan or Gujarat and about a foot high hangs on the left wall. Bulky maroon upholstered dining chairs and wood veneer tabletops comprise the furniture. Gupta uses an alcove at the rear as office and meeting space. Here, once again are India’s ubiquitous stackable aluminium chairs found in so many warehouses of wedding furniture suppliers. Gupta renovates every five years. Serving staff comprise an incongruous duo – a past middle-age Punjabi speaking man not in uniform, though in the anonymous pant-shirt attire of urban Indian men. The other is Gupta’s pleasant twentysomething daughter, raised and educated in Britain, also not in uniform.



Sunrise Radio plays on the stereo. It is a bewildering yet successful multi-lingual channel of Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil and English programming. Gupta's business depends on the Asian tourist. He believes that locals account for not more than five percent of Broadway's customers. Summer is the busiest season. Gupta has had, and still does have, other business interests. He previously owned a jewelry store and a petrol station. Presently, he manufactures Ayurveda (Indian medicine). He hopes to export British-made Ayurveda to India. He ironically, yet very convincingly reasons that its foreign origins will confirm his Ayurveda's quality and credibility to the Indian consumer.

Basics done I moved onto Hindutva (a term of contested definition that very generally describes the rise of Hindu militancy in Indian politics). I had met Gupta previously when Ash Verma and I had lunch at the Chaat house and knew what to expect. In the interim, I had guiltlessly constructed him as the stereotypical Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organisation) supporter. He is usually an urban



Vishwa Hindu Kendra, Southall
21st Jan '03

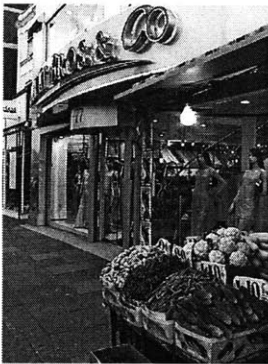
middle-class trader, riddled with a conditioned resentment of all things non-Hindu. Gupta fit frighteningly well. I braced myself for the myopic linearity of Hindutva's locomotive logic.

His initial responses were careful. Supposedly, there was no religious antagonism among communities, and that Hindu religious organisations piously avoided politics. He was more forthcoming after a cup of tea. He first laid his scorn on the “minority community” – Muslims. Since India’s independence they have grown “unchecked from five crores to twenty two crores” (a crore is 10 million in the Indian system of counting; his figures were inaccurate). Next, he took on the “illiterate rural Punjabi’s with leftist leanings”, phraseology almost directly from an Indian English newspaper. He did say that he, and most other Hindus, follow news in India everyday – “we are boiling within”, and “if it is cold in Dilli, I will sneeze.” Finally, he spoke about the extensive and quiet mobilisation of the Hindu Right in England. I had spent an annoying forty minutes with him.

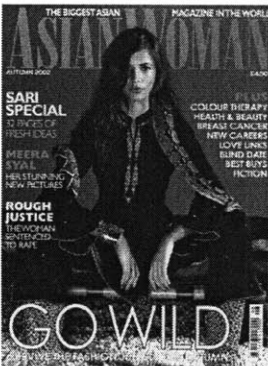
BANWAIT & COMPANY

Jag was in his twenties, and had been involved with the running of Banwait & Company for ten years. The fabric store was established in 1958, and is one of the oldest Punjabi stores in Southall. It is also one of the largest, occupying two floors of a double bay property on Broadway. The young Sikh wore a simplified black turban with clean lines and minimal fabric. Several young and some old men wore it on the streets. To the aware (I, only partially), the turban code is easy to decipher. The manner of winding the strip of cloth around the Sikh head can indicate an origin in rural Punjab, in Delhi, in East Africa or in England. I met Jag at his warehouse on Park Avenue. He spoke with the shortened English accent that I had been immersed in for several days. A framed certificate from Punjab University hung on the wall behind his desk. I was not close enough to read what it said.

Banwait & Company was remodeled two years ago. Jag designed the changes to a very clear brief. His targeted customers are second and third generation Indians from England and Europe. He serves the high-end of the market, and has



positioned his store to appear attractive to them. He serves a generation that is used to shopping in Oxford Street. But Southall is ‘dull and dreary’. Jag deliberately provides a contemporary Western and mainstream English image to his store, complete with stainless steel, and large glass shop windows minimally occupied. The shop façade has protruding fascia which bears the store name in shiny metal. There are more such on Broadway. Jag claimed the others were imitators.



Jag has introduced a designer brand that literally rides piggyback on Banwait – ‘Sequinze@Banwait’. Jag is using his store’s reputation to reposition itself and refine its customer targeting. The upper floor at Banwait & Company is devoted to this upscale brand. Sequinze@Banwait, along with Jaan@Punjab Brothers and other such, advertise in Asian Woman and Asian Fashion – magazines that expectedly have the texture and attitude of Cosmopolitan. Jag was uncomfortable with photographs, and I was unable to get any interior shots of Banwait or of Sequinze@Banwait.

Jag has extensive business dealings with India and visits there often. These trips to India are symbolic markers that lend credibility to immigrant Indian businesses (Ruma did so too when she spoke about her business). There is no longing nor pride, but the aim of establishing credibility given that the businesses position themselves as dealing in Indian products. Banwait & Company does not sell anything English-made for that would be too expensive. The store procures its fabrics mainly from Korea and Japan, and its readymade Indian wear comes from India.

Southall is the best location for Jag to conduct his business. The town has become an iconic magnet for Asians all over Europe. They constitute a prized customer base for Southall businesses, far too valuable to abandon. Jag may consider an additional outlet in central London, but is not sure that his products, presently serving a niche market will find acceptance with the mainstream London consumer. Jag is a busy proprietor. He was interrupted frequently by the telephone. He ignored all but two. One was a female employee. He spoke to her in a mix of

English and Punjabi. It was not the creolic mix that urban north Indians make of Hindi and English. His mix saw the full utterance of an idea and sentence in one language. He did not succumb to the more convenient vocabulary of the other language when pressed for words.

MADHU'S

Madhu's is a twenty two year old Indian restaurant on South Road. It is owned by a branch of the Indian-Kenyan-British family that also owns Brilliant restaurant. It is very different though, and the filial linkage makes the comparison even more interesting. First, Madhu's unlike Brilliant is managed by the second generation of the immigrant family. I met Poonam Anand, thirtysomething niece of Brilliant's Kewal Anand. She is marketing manager for Madhu's. Her two brothers are head chef and managing director respectively. Second and more obvious is the difference in décor. Brilliant is old, staid and ad hoc. Madhu's is new, glitzy and very deliberate. The present décor of the restaurant is very recent. It reopened in early 2003 with a new image and logo after a fire had gutted the restaurant the previous year. However, the damage was not as devastating as might appear. Eighty percent of Madhu's business comes from outdoor catering – mostly high-end South Asian weddings. This continued even when the retail restaurant closed for business. Madhu's has positioned itself to serve a pan-English Asian wedding market, strategically extracting itself from the Southall retail world. It is very clear as to where its business lies. On its website, for instance: "As the younger generation of Asians comes of age, the demand for a sophisticated approach to their wedding day has grown".

The retail activity at the restaurant serves a small but regular clientele that is evenly Asian and white British. On the upper floor is a private dining area where catering clients are treated to meal samples. It was here that I met Poonam Anand. She spoke to me at length about Madhu's marketing strategy. Her adjectives were as I expected to hear. Listed in sequence the phrases could as well construct the nation building narrative of a newly independent country – "fresh blood", "bold and



clear”, “new ideas”, “enthusiasm”, “crisp new image”, “not a traditional look”, “neither clinically cold”, and the like. The restaurant did hire an interior designer – white not Asian, but a big name in Asian restaurant décor, nonetheless. His trademark water feature lies below a glass floor in the entrance lobby. Everywhere glass, stainless steel and leather abound. Italian designer chairs lend a “stylish modern touch”. The lone Ganesh at the entrance provides the only clue to the ethnicity of the restaurant (put there for the necessary *puja*, the ritualistic ceremony of Hindu worship). Poonam explains that the British have known about Indian food for a while. A threshold has been crossed where superficial design devices are no longer necessary to educate or entice the mainstream about India or Indian food – ‘there is no need to exotify’. She is right. London’s earliest Indian restaurant dated from 1809 – the Hindoostanee Coffee House at Portman Square in central London (very close to where I stayed on both my trips to London).⁵⁵



Madhu’s may be the only Indian restaurant I have been to that has waitresses. It is surely the only one that employs non-South Asians – waiters and waitresses. Both the men and women wear black tunics and trousers with utility-hold-all belts strapped around their waists (again a first for me). In addition, hostesses in black fusion sarees receive clients in the lobby and serve the VIP room. The table cutlery appears to announce the sequential arrival of a continental ten-course meal, not the messy food of India.

THE GLASSY JUNCTION PUB

At the northeast corner of the intersection of South Road and Park Road is a three-story building. On its chamfered edge, looking obliquely toward the railway station out of the corner of his eye is a twelve-foot tall Sikh farmer who hovers fifteen above the busy intersection. When dark, the grinning cutout silently hammers a *dhhol* with staccato neon drumsticks. This is the Glassy Junction, a

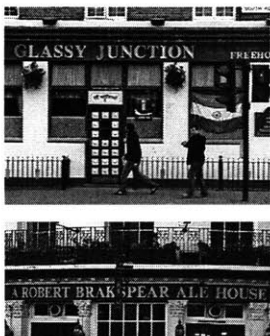
⁵⁵ From an online and not reliable history of the Indian restaurant in The United Kingdom at <http://www.menumagazine.co.uk/book/restauranthistory.html> (14 May 2003).

'Punjabi pub', located on some of Southall's most valuable real estate. It commands an aerial presence of the first intersection as one walks from Southall station towards Broadway.

The pub is rich in imagery drawing from, exaggerating and celebrating the myths that the Sikh and others have constructed about the Sikhs. The plainly obvious one on the exterior celebrates the hard working, well-built, big-hearted, and honest rural Sikh male. Within the pub, seating sections are titled Amritsar, Ludhiana, Julundhar, Sangroor, Roopnagar, Pathankot, and Gurdaspur. There may have been even more that I failed to note. These are all references to towns or regions within Punjab. They are used as labels that trigger instant imagery in the minds of those that have been there. In the minds of those that have



not, it constructs an essentialised and reified notion of Punjab, an abstract object of cultural allegiance. The bar tender informed me that in a section recently closed there had been *charpais*. The *charpai* (literally four-legged) is a rope-woven cot found in north Indian highway rest stops on which truck drivers (mostly Sikh) rest and eat. The roadside *charpai* has grown to be associated with the Sikh truck drivers of



Punjab. The Glassy Junction, 4000 miles from Punjab employs a refined and esoteric imagery to recreate the aura of Punjab, and to establish its own credibility.

From one wall, a five-foot photographic portrait of Malkit Singh, a Bhangra singer and a local God, looks down rakishly from over his sunglasses. On another Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Sikh monarch of the nineteenth century gazes regally toward Southall station. The bar is of an ornate white metal, finely worked on. The furniture is inscrutable, comprising of small round timber tables with very small cushioned stools. I cannot identify their design and cultural references. The waiters wear *kurtas* (loose knee-length upper wear) and *lungis* (a wrap-around bottom cloth) of rural Punjab.

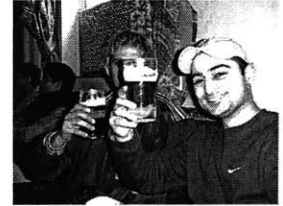
A notice outside proudly reveals that the Glassy Junction is the first pub in the UK to accept Indian

rupees. Another one within lists the Rupee prices of beer, shockingly expensive when converted from Pounds. The pub's street sign belongs to the genre of the English pub sign. Conventional English and Irish pubs advertise themselves on a deep coloured narrow strip (maroon, black, blue or green) that runs across the face of the pub above the entrance. The lettering is in classical Roman script, and executed in gilded paint or metal. The Glassy junction sign uses a similar technique. Its text is in shiny silver metal over a deep pink horizontal band.

My second visit to Southall coincided with the Cricket World Cup in South Africa. I walked into the Glassy Junction on a March afternoon just as India beat Sri Lanka. Stupidly, I had missed witnessing Southall's support for the Indian team. Fortunately, I was there to see the celebrations. Sikh teenagers, British citizens, draped in the Indian flag, paraded in victory through the pub. Losing interest in the

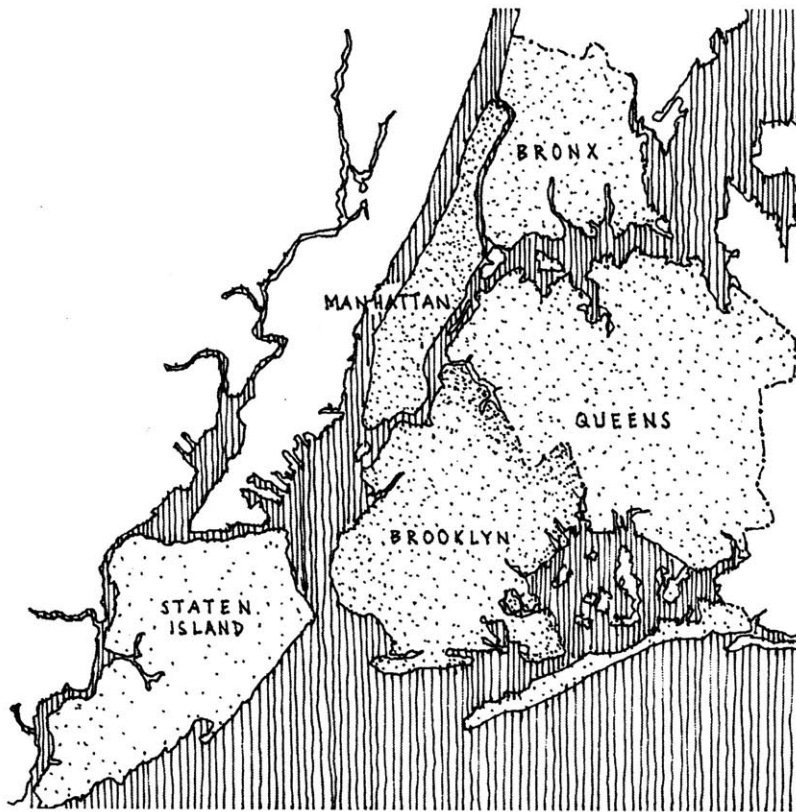
post-match analysis, they moved on into one of the inner rooms to play pool. On the streets, other boys in cars hooted their happiness. I thought of what Ruma told me about cricket violence when India played Pakistan. Perhaps, I should have made my trip a week earlier when India had beaten Pakistan. Perhaps not.

Anil and Ajay, both second generation British Indians in their twenties, drank beer through the match and even more afterwards to celebrate. They are not regulars at the Glassy Junction. Ajay is from Hounslow (on the south toward Heathrow). Anil is a Southall boy who now works in Australia. Ajay pointedly said after I explained why I was in Southall, 'Its hip to be Indian now.' As examples, he listed the success of Andrew Lloyd Weber and AR Rahman's musical, Bombay Dreams, and the May 2002 festival of Hindi cinema in Selfridges on Oxford Street. I agreed and showed them my hip Indian sketches before I left.



3. 74TH STREET, JACKSON HEIGHTS

This chapter will not be as long as the previous. Nor will it be as elaborately narrated. I conducted my field research in New York City after two trips to London, which had immersed me in the Punjabi world of Southall for two weeks. I carried its fetish a lot longer than that. My trips to Jackson Heights in Queens were shorter, later, toward the end of the semester, and with Southall as constant carry-on baggage. I had fewer encounters, and made fewer sketches. Consequently, I have fewer stories to tell. I missed Ash Verma, his deft facilitating manner, his Punjabi network and his politician-like resourcefulness. This chapter may have had read differently had it been written independently of, or before, the Southall chapter. Nonetheless, in it, I narrate the story of the Indian businesses on 74th Street in Jackson Heights in Queens.



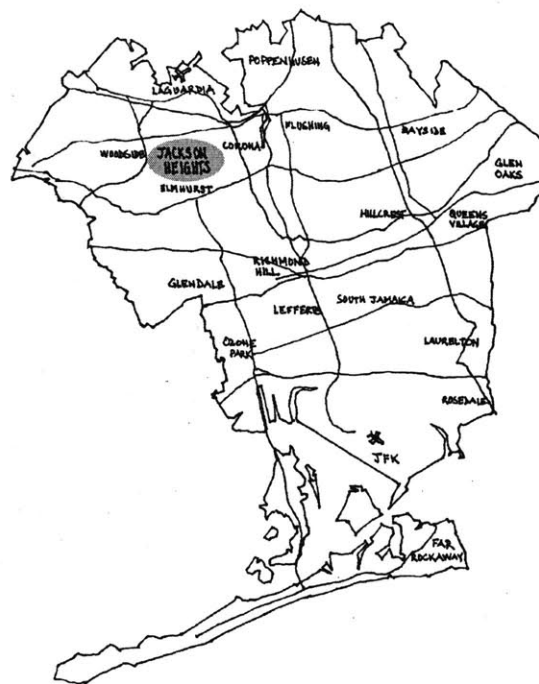
QUEENS

Queens is one of five boroughs of New York City. It derives its name from Queens County, in turn named after Queen Catherine of Braganza in 1683. The Queen was consort to King Charles II of England. The King had a county too. Located on Long Island as well, Kings County lay on the immediate south and is now known as Brooklyn. In 1898, Queens along with the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan became New York City.¹ The

¹ Vincent F. Seyfreid, *Queens, a pictorial history* (Norfolk, Virginia: Donning Co., 1982), p.39.

borough has since found itself stereotyped as a rough, drug-dealing, working-class, immigrant outer borough.² In 2000, Queens had a population of over 2 million, of which almost 70 percent were non-white.³

Jackson Heights is named after a John C. Jackson, ‘the man who laid out Northern Boulevard’ in Queens.⁴ Until the early 1900s, it comprised farms and few houses. In 1909, the Queensboro Bridge connected Manhattan to Queens over the East River. In the same year, Queensboro Corporation bought the farms of Jackson Heights, all 325 acres. It laid streets and built apartments, and by 1930, construction was complete. By then, the area’s population had risen to 44,000 from the 3,600 it had been in 1920. Jackson Heights had the “most spectacular housing complex in Queens and one that attracted national attention.”⁵ The Garden apartment was locally invented in 1914. It consisted of “large buildings, attractive room layouts, many windows and large gardens.” Jackson Heights also pioneered the co-op apartment in 1919.⁶ These innovations ensured that its apartments were more valuable than others in Queens. Single-family houses were also available. On my visit to Jackson Heights, I stayed in one on 83rd Street just off Northern Boulevard. Hannah and Yat, a young German-Thai filmmaking couple sublet me a room for four days, just as the US invaded Iraq. They in turn had rented their upper floor



Queens

² *New York Times*, 12 November 1990 – late edition. Mainstream press has often used this terminology, especially with regard to the immigrant Colombian population.

³ Queens Borough Public Library online data from the 2000 Census at <http://www.queenslibrary.org/pub/#demographics> (May 15 2003).

⁴ Vincent F. Seyfreid, *op. cit.*, p.196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.48

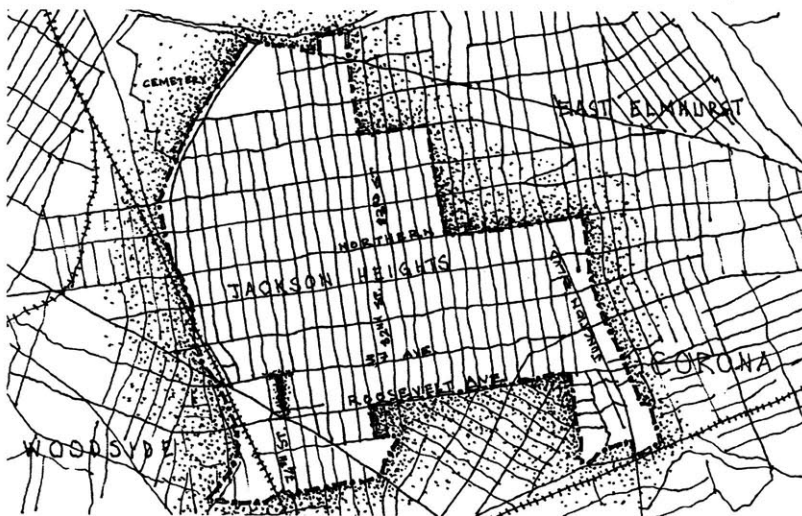
⁶ Daniel Karatzas, *Jackson Heights, a garden in the city : the history of America's first garden and cooperative apartment community* (Jackson Heights, N.Y., Jackson Heights Beautification Group, 1990) has a comprehensive architectural history of the neighbourhood.

apartment from an Indian landlady, who had “been in the States for years.” Parts of Jackson Heights (mainly those that housed the Garden Apartments) were designated a historic district by New York’s Landmark Preservation Commission in 1994.

The Dutch and English were the first immigrants to Queens in the seventeenth century. By the nineteenth they had fully displaced the Native Americans. They were joined next by immigrants from Germany and Ireland. By the turn of the 20th century the neighbourhood was mainly Italian and Jewish. The Borough remained largely white till the 60s. Hispanics arrived in the early 60s, and today constitute over a half million of Queens 2.2 million residents.

Hispanics are the largest non-white group in Queens. The biggest group within that umbrella identity of the US census is Puerto Rican (about 5 percent of Queens’ population), followed by Dominican, Colombian and Ecuadorian. Asians constitute a little over 17 percent of Queens’ population. The Chinese are the largest Asian group at six percent, and Indians come next at just under five.⁷ Jackson Heights is not and never was a significant South Asian residential neighbourhood. It is however the most diverse community in New York City.⁸ In 2000, it had a

Jackson Heights



population of about 120,000. Asians accounted for more than 20 percent of its residents, and Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis together less than 10 percent. Hispanics, at more than 50 percent, were by far the largest group. Colombians, Ecuadorians and Mexicans dominated.⁹

⁷ See Roger Sanjek, *The future of us all : race and neighborhood politics in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) for a detailed picture of local politics in Queens.

⁸ *Daily News*, May 6 2002

⁹ <http://www.queenslibrary.org/pub/#demographics> (15 May 2003).

74th Street till the 70's was "a modest, unhurried shopping district – a neighborly cluster of delis and groceries, a tailor, a shoemaker and a stationer, and a bakery that was, to the locals anyway, a landmark."¹⁰ The first Indian business on 74th Street was established in 1973 and by the late 80s most other businesses had left. Many of the Indian businesses had moved from the original 'Little India' in Manhattan on Lexington Avenue around 28th and 29th streets.¹¹ They were attracted by cheaper rents and a growing and reliable stream of Indian shoppers.

The New York Times in a 1991 article observed a peculiar behavior of Indian immigrants vis-à-vis their businesses:

What is particularly striking about this busy subcontinental enclave inserted among Koreans and South Americans and older American-born generations is that few if any Indians live in it. It is all commercial and the Indian custom (as well as other consumers) comes from outside the neighborhood. The Colombians, however, do live there, and along with them is a Spanish-speaking population that patronizes the dozens of restaurants that serve in a South American way.¹²

Another press report noted that "[o]n weekends the streets are clogged for two blocks with cars bearing out-of-state license plates, and many stores have toll-free telephone numbers."¹³ Both reports highlighted a single and critical point (one that makes its birth very different from that of Southall's Broadway). 74th Street was born to serve a dispersed Indian market, not a concentrated local hub of residences. The street had and continues to have a loose relationship with the residential districts of Queens (South Asians today constitute less than 10 percent of Jackson Heights' population; Southall in contrast has upwards of 65 percent). The businesses located on 74th Street primarily for reasons of access. Though they did

¹⁰ *New York Times*, January 4 1993

¹¹ Madhulika Khandelwal, *Becoming American, being Indian : an immigrant community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p.19.

¹² *New York Times*, 3 May 1991

¹³ *New York Times*, 28 November 1993.



⑦ line over Roosevelt Ave at 74th St. Jackson Heights 21th March '03

serve a local Queens population, being accessible to a larger regional market was of greater concern (in their early years, Southall's businesses did not care for regional accessibility, aiming only to serve the local Indian population of Southall).

The head of 74th street lies at the intersection of two busy Queens arteries, Roosevelt Avenue and Broadway. The 74th street is also a stop on the elevated '7' line and the underground 'E'. The twenty minute commute to mid-town Manhattan makes the street one of the best connected locations in Queens.¹⁴ Real estate was more valuable relative to other Queens neighbourhoods, but the Indians (of the 70s at least) were not typical immigrants, and they could afford the higher prices.¹⁵ Furthermore, rents on 74th street in the 70s were lower than the rents that

¹⁴ *New York Times*, January 4, 1993. Mr. Vora, manager of Sam and Raj, the first store said they chose 74th Street because it offered good space and low rent, not to mention the advantage of being at the confluence of subway and bus lines at Roosevelt Avenue and Broadway.

¹⁵ *Crains New York Business*, 8 May 2000. The article mentioned rents on 74th street were higher than on 82nd street (home of more mainstream shops and also host to a Business Improvement District).

many Indian businesses in Manhattan were paying. The set of these circumstances induced Indian stores to locate here in the 70s and 80s. Since then, 74th Street in Jackson Heights has remained ambivalently detached from the higher Indian numbers in Flushing, Elmhurst and Richmond Hill (also in Queens). Its disconnected commerce is fed by a dispersed residential catchment that spans the tri-State area, comprising suburban middle class Indians that drive in on weekend SUV's to shop for groceries, clothes, jewelry and music.

THE INDIANS OF QUEENS

Maxine Fisher conducted the first ethnographic study of New York City's Indians in 1975. She concluded that 'Indians have difficulty in organizing as Indians'.¹⁶ She assigned this shortcoming to the possibility of them bearing and advertising multiple identities. Fisher had encountered the fluidity and artificialness of being Indian – a colonial construction of 'national' identity that concealed a deeper identity that residents of the sub-continent loosely wore.¹⁷ Nearly all her respondents came after 1965, the year that visa regulations allowed the inflow of professional migrants from Asia to the US. And they came scattered from all over urban India, and some from the West Indies, East Africa and Great Britain, and they lived scattered all over New York City. Gujaratis outnumbered other respondents but by no means dominated. Her Indians hardly fit the profile of immigrants as America had known. This group was urban, highly educated, white-collar and English speaking. In 1975, she listed that 93 percent of the Indians admitted to the US were either technical professionals or their dependants.¹⁸

Madhulika Khandelwal's study came next, twenty years later.¹⁹ Her Indians were not like Fisher's. The Indians she spoke of and to were residents of Queens

¹⁶ Maxine Fisher, *The Indians of New York City: A study of Immigrants from India* (Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 1980), p. 4. In 1975, 93% of Indians admitted were 'professional/technical workers' or their families.

¹⁷ Sunil Khilnani, *The idea of India* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

¹⁸ Maxine Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Madhulika Khandelwal, *Becoming American, being Indian : an immigrant community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002)

(that in 2000 was home to more than 60 percent of the city's Indians). These Indians were finally more like the immigrants that New York City was familiar with. Many of them had been sponsored by immigrant relatives for family reunion visas, and were not necessarily skilled and professional. Khandelwal's Indians worked as cab drivers, newsstand workers, waiters and store clerks. They lived and worked in Queens. Some commuted to Manhattan, others to working class jobs further north on Long Island.

Initially, in the 60s, most of New York City's few thousand Indians lived in Manhattan. As the stock of Indians grew, they expanded in the 70s to Elmhurst and Flushing in Queens. In 1990, 59 percent of the City's Indians lived in Queens. In 2000 this was up to 63 percent. In comparison Manhattan had 8 percent in both 1990 and 2000; down however from 14 percent in 1980. The 2000 census had 170,899 Indians living in New York City. 94,590 lived in Queens.²⁰

I met Dr. Khandelwal at Queens College in January. She works at the Asian American Centre there. I reached more than an hour late from New Haven, by commuter rail, subway, bus and a long walk. She was very nice. She came to the US in 1984 for a PhD (now a published book, frequently referred to in this thesis). She pronounced her surname with an American inflection. I was surprised that she would do so, having come here after a full education in Delhi. I had just returned from my first trip to Southall and was toying with an unformulated hypothesis – immigrant congregations correlate with low incomes. Dr. Khandelwal was quick to strip my hypothesis of its generalist assumptions. There was nothing low-income about the early Indian businesses on Jackson Heights. She also advised me to stay clear of religious identity, one of the lens with which I had hoped to analyse 74th street. Religious structures in Queens are dispersed and unrelated to the business street (unlike Southall's). I would run out of time tracking down the temples, mosques and gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) dispersed throughout Queens.

²⁰ Madhulika Khandelwal, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

...president of the Jackson Heights Neighborhood Association said many in his group "think the boat is full...They think there should be zero percent immigration." ... a Jackson Heights resident for 50 years complained that immigrants in his neighborhood have packed single-family homes with more than 20 people. "They take money, work or whatever, and it is siphoned out of the community."²⁵

Both groups have made recent attempts at rapprochement. The Merchants Association, dominated by Indians, now has a position on the board of its aesthetic adversary, the Beautification Group. Together they produce posters like the one that jointly greets and warns customers to Ramesh Navani's sari shop.

But all is not yet well. The website of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group is silent about Indian businesses and events in its short historical outline of the neighbourhood.²⁶ Italian and Polish structures and events predominate that list of significant local occurrences. Another community website lists hotline numbers and encourages residents to complain against street litter and car honks.²⁷ It also provides convenient clues that will giveaway an illegally subdivided housing unit, or one that has a basement illegally converted to a place of worship – "Conditions may include multiple entrances, 3 or more doorbells or mail boxes." Both websites have online picture galleries. Both portray a world empty of any Asian or Hispanic presence in Jackson Heights.

Shiv Dass is the President of the Jackson Heights Merchants Association. The association, composed entirely of Indians, was set up in 1990, when relations with residents were on a downhill slope made slippery by street filth and car honks. Dass is in his sixties, has thick silver hair, and a Delhi-Punjabi businessman's intonation to his Hindi. He is short, and has the loose smooth jowls of an old north Indian Jat (a rural caste of north west India). He also has a comforting paternal manner, and I

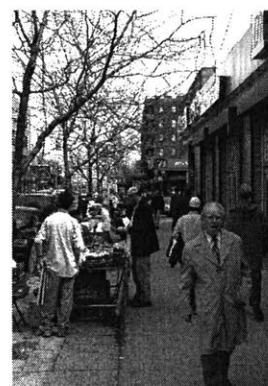
²⁵ *New York Times*, 3 March 1996.

²⁶ Website of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group at <http://www.preserve.org/jhbg/jhbg.htm> (14 May 2003).

²⁷ <http://www.jacksonheightsnyc.com/> (14 May 2003).

assumed the role of an eager researcher looking for guidance. I met him in a tiny office in the basement of his clothes shop, Shingar. His desk was dominated by a small television set. It showed streaming video from four hidden cameras in his shop. Dass's wife oversaw the employees in person while he spoke to me about the street and his business.

He did not have the manner or the waddle of his Southall counterpart, Harbans Lal Shukla, but spoke of similar things: The street is all about retail. Jewelry stores dominate – there are now more than 30. Each would have an inventory of more than a million dollars, and they collectively make 74th Street unusually wealthy for the neighbourhood. The wealth has begun to draw local politicians. Dass showed me an album full of photographs from the last Diwali celebration. The street was closed to traffic and a stage erected on one end. On it, in the photographs, politicians addressed and dancers danced. The street also draws film stars and politicians from India. Though not dependent on locals, 90 percent of them do shop at the street. This winter has been very bad for business, and the invasion of Iraq has made it even worse. Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis comprise the bulk of shoppers. They come from New Jersey, Connecticut and as far as Boston. Edison in New Jersey, also with a significant presence of Indian stores, is a competitor. Almost all the shops on 74th Street are rented from American owners. India Sari Palace, a large three story building adjacent to Dass's shop, is probably the only Indian-owned property on 74th Street. Its proprietor, Ramesh Navani, has been a past President of the Merchants Association. Street trading on 74th Street is not permitted. It is, though, on 37 Avenue, around the corner. Here all shops can intrude a foot on the sidewalk. Independent street traders on the Avenue need permits from New York City's Department of Consumer affairs. Muslim vendors are permitted to sell religious books. Their permit is conditional on their profits being given to religious charities – "But you know these Muslims, they sell everything." 74th Street does not have drug or prostitution issues – "You know Indians don't do these things." The street opens for business at around 10.30 in the morning and closes at 8 in the evening. The Merchants Association takes the

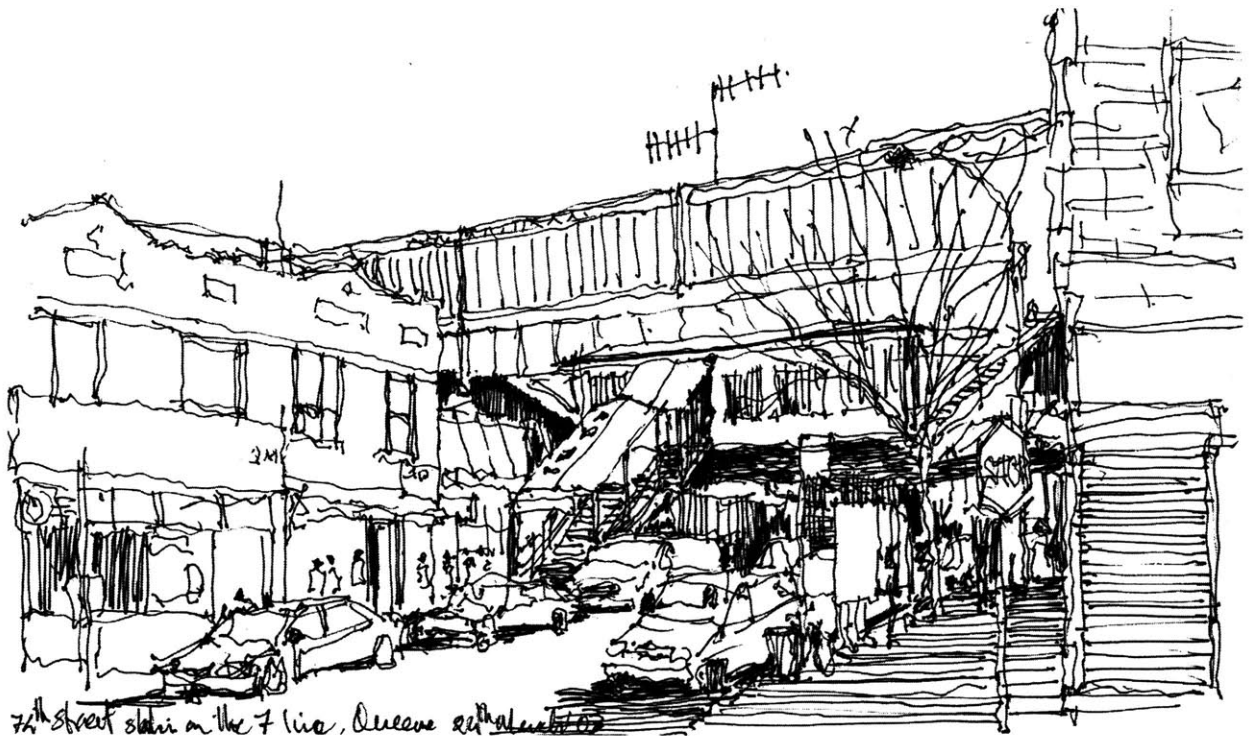


Captain and Sergeant of the local Police precinct for meals twice or thrice a year – “keeps them happy.”

Dass gave me a brochure produced by the group on the 55th anniversary of India’s independence. It is officious and self-congratulatory in a typically Indian way. Photographs of present and past office bearers precede letters from important and powerful men and women. The publications also lists the mission points of the Association. They reveal the political issues that it has, and was forced, to contend with: “To educate storeowners and shoppers to improve the shopping environment”, “To celebrate Diwali, Christmas, Eid and Hanukah by lighting up trees in the area”, and “to contribute money to the 115 Precinct of NYPD to buy bicycles for patrolling.”²⁸

THE STREET

The elevated station of the ‘7’ line crowns the head of 74th street. Extending north from it for two short blocks are concentrated the two hundred Indian

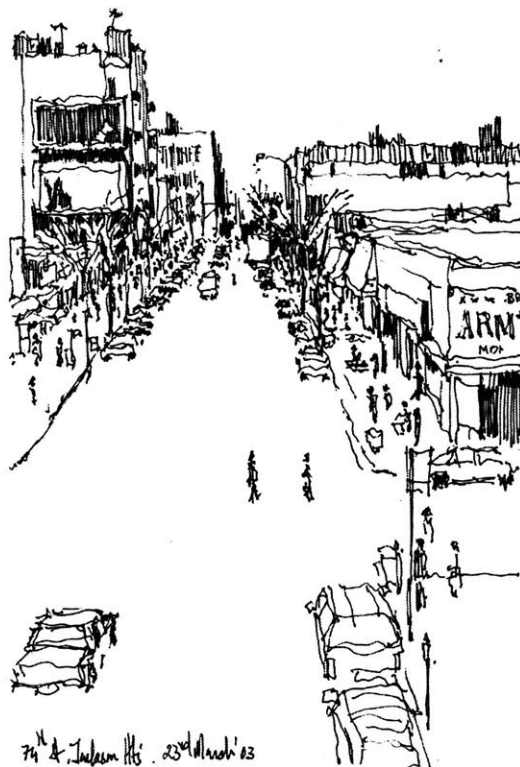


²⁸ *Celebration of India's 55th Independence Day: New York City Hall August 15, 2002* (Jackson Heights, NYC: Jackson Heights Merchants Association, 2002)

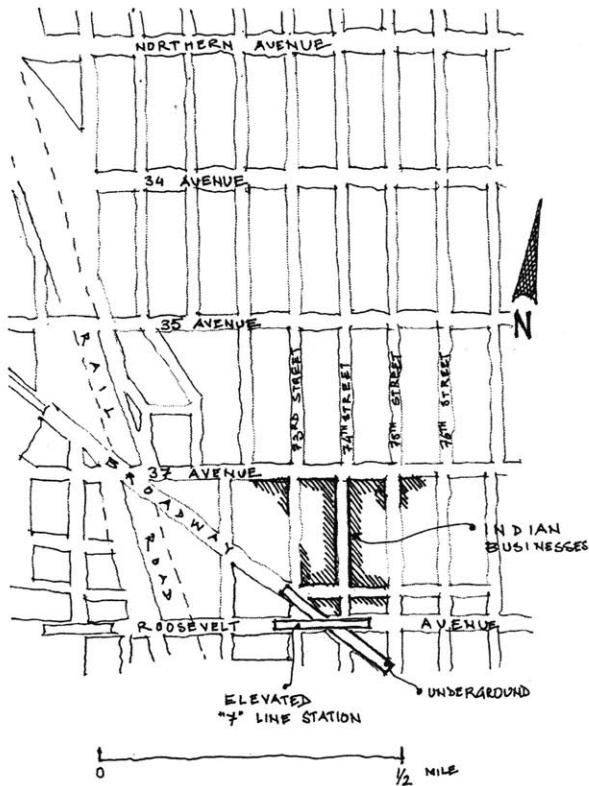
businesses of Jackson Heights.²⁹ The suspended station provides the first view of the street, deceptively non-Indian and ordinary looking.

Yet, every store on 74th Street, with the exception of two or three, is Indian-Pakistani-Bangladeshi. There are about two hundred such. The subcontinent runs the length of the street and then turns both corners onto 37 Avenue, strengthens its Bangladeshi personality, and goes on for a bit more. Now it stops, grindingly. Its progress blocked by older Italian and American businesses. On the other end of the street on the South, under the train station, it stops short of the corner of Roosevelt Avenue. A thriving Hispanic world keeps it boxed in. Toward the west is a Korean neighbourhood, and little further is a tiny congregation of Philipino businesses, at the most ten in number.

The street has sidewalks of constant width, about 15 feet. The Eastern sidewalk, host to Patel Brothers (a large Indian grocer), Jackson Diner, and Indian Taj (both Indian restaurants) is busier than the western. There is no street trading, except for a temporary Hindu cart that distributes copies of the Gita and positions itself on weekends. Jewelry stores dominate the street. Their shop windows, like all Indian jewelry stores anywhere in the world, are ablaze in a mix of gold and bright orange halogens. The jewelry stores of Jackson Heights are peculiar in one respect, however. Several of them advertise a 'London' lineage – Raj Jewelers of London, for example. Shiv Dass had explained why.



²⁹ *Ibid.*



Indians buy 22 and 24 karat gold for jewelry, nothing less. London gold – Sterling, is quality marked unlike American gold. These jewelers indicate their quality with a stamp of approval that Indian buyers are very familiar with. At another level it hints at trans-continental business success. Dass and Sam Kapadia (one of my later respondents), present and past Presidents of the Merchants Association rubbished any real London linkages that the jewelers might have.

Weekends are busy (but not as much, or as loud, or as frenetic as Southall's). Out of town buyers crowd the sidewalk. Their cars park and double park on the single one-way lane of the street. Old Sikh men act as coolies to Indian families. They ferry carts of groceries to family

mini-vans and SUVs. (Coolies, India's original migrant labour, persist in Indian vocabulary. They are the righteously short-tempered red-uniformed luggage porters of Indian railway stations who carry impossible loads on steady heads). The mornings on 74th Street are dominated by service trucks, offloading groceries for Patel brothers, the largest Indian grocer on the street. However, the bustle is misleading, I was told. Business has been bad for some months, a sales girl at one of the music shops confided in a thick American-Bangladeshi accent.



English and Hindi are the languages of the street. No region of India is overrepresented in Queens. Like in the mother country, here too, English allows Indians to converse with each other. Music stores play Hindi film music, and a lone young South Asian boy cruises the street cyclically, his car emanating bass Indian beats. Eagle Theatre, just off 74th Street used to be the Earle, a porn theatre that showed some of the “raunchiest gay adult movies” and also live sex acts.³⁰ The

³⁰ *New York Times*, 19 November 1995.

Earle closed down in 1995 and re-opened as the Eagle under a Pakistani management, and now shows Indian cinema.³¹

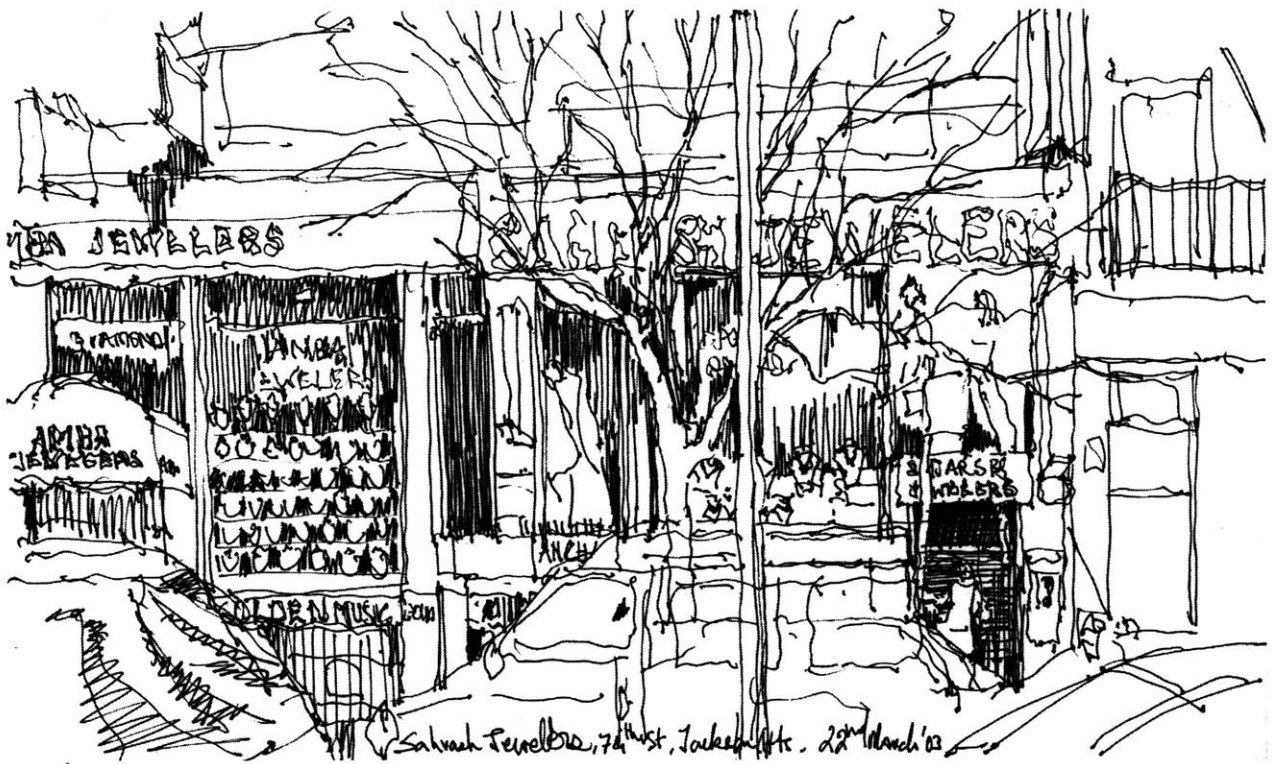
Street and shop signs are in English. Bengali makes an appearance where the street meets 37 Avenue, and is a recent phenomenon. Khandelwal had noted that shops signs in the 70s were exclusively in English, the language that all urban Indians spoke, in fact preferred to speak. Recent immigrants are non-English speaking and businesses have changed to serve them (many think downgraded). 74th Street, early in its Indian reincarnation, had stores that were run by ex-professional entrepreneurs that served affluent customers. It is no longer so. For the suburban or Manhattan Indian it is now only a place to quickly shop (if at all), and depart quicker. Class discrimination surfaced as the Indian immigrant stock started representing a wider spectrum of American economic society. Such disdain and derision is also true of the international traveling Indian, elite by definition.

The Sikhs, ubiquitous in Southall, are a meager presence here. Jesse's Emporium proclaims at its glazed entrance door – PROUD TO BE AMERICAN AND A SIKH. The sticker was almost certainly pasted after September 11, 2001. Although many shop windows advertise their love and pride for the US in red and blue, the Sikhs are the most at risk. Their turbans and beards have become a dangerous thing.



Some store fronts advertise the presence within of an impossible number of businesses. Scarce retail space on this street has forced some businesses to cross a psychological threshold. They conduct their retail not at ground but at a higher floor. The numerous signs at various levels on the face of subdivided building add visual clutter to a physically mundane street. The signs are pasted on boxes that protrude a uniform two feet from the building face. Almost all New York signs that I saw did so. Those in other American cities that I have visited, Boston and

³¹ *Daily New* (New York), 1 August 1996.



Cambridge for instance, do not. At the head of the street, near the station, buildings are a single story high. They rise up to three or four stories by the northern end of the street. On the east sidewalk there is one building that rises an incongruous seven or eight stories.



On the west sidewalk, some stores employ a uniquely New York device. Canvas canopies, akin to those on Park Avenue, project protectively from the face of the building over the main entrance. The India Sari Palace has a narrow maroon awning that shelters the sidewalk outside its entrance and gains respectability for its business in typical New York fashion. Other stores, similar to Southall's Palika Bazaar, gain respectability by cross-referencing themselves to iconic triggers of Indian retail imagery. Karol Bagh, at the corner of on 75th

Street and 37 Avenue is an Indian departmental store that refers to a busy market in West Delhi.

The business cases that follow are not like those of Southall. All of these are run by first generation immigrants. The twenty year old congregation of Indian businesses on 74th street is younger than Southall's fifty. Also, second generation Indian Americans have the social and educational skills to pursue white collar professions. To many, managing immigrant businesses is not a career option worth considering.

SHINGAR, KARISHMA, AND KRISHNA

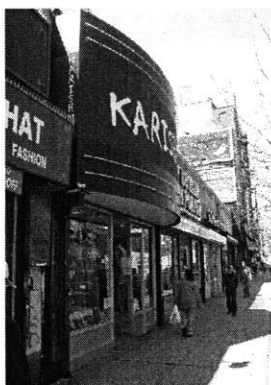
Shiv Dass, President of the Merchants Association owns three stores on 74th Street. Krishna, a jewelry store, was established in 1986. Next came Shingar, a clothes store, in 1990. Karishma, a designer clothes store, came last in 2000. Dass spoke to me in his tiny basement office in Shingar. He had migrated to the States in 1966 from Punjab. His wife helps run Shingar. His daughter looks after Krishna, the jewelry store. His sons are professionals and not involved in running the businesses.

Shingar is in a premises that has divided itself into a number of smaller stores. Dass's clothes store occupies all of the 'lower ground floor', the basement. Above him are two jewelers. Above them are the offices of a lawyer and a firm of accountants. Suspended somewhere among them is the Bombay Driving School. Dass pays a monthly rent of 12,000 dollars for about 1,500 square feet of space. The store sells women's clothes – both ready-to-wear and unstitched fabrics. His customers are 50 percent Indian, 25 percent Bangladeshi, 10 percent Pakistani and the rest American. His serving staff are women, clad in the north Indian salwar-kameez (loose knee length upper shirt, and loose trousers), and usually recent immigrants from Bangladesh or India. Above a deep red carpet hang large glass chandeliers. The lighting is bright and white and general.

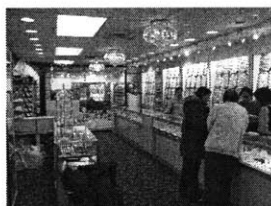




The store is very cluttered. Dass did hire an interior designer when the store first opened. But since then he has “adjusted Shingaar to [his] convenience”. It shows. The store tells a story of just-put-it-there-no-there situations. Mannequins and rotating hangar displays leave very little space to walk. The store window cannibalized by other stores in the building has room for a few cramped mannequins. There is no minimalism in this clothes store.



Karishma is not very different, though it is positioned to serve the higher end of the market, and has a grand curved fascia above its entrance. It is less cluttered and more expensive, and appears more restrained. But it is still new and perhaps Dass’ ‘convenience’ has not yet been at work. Karishma has an intriguing product. It sells exact reproductions of clothes worn by film actresses in Indian films. The product is not unique to Karishma. I saw other shop windows advertising the coveted celebrity attire.



Dass’ third store, Krishna, sells Indian jewelry, and is not “of London.” Of all store genres, the jewelry store is most similar to the Indian original. The product is so unique that local contextual influences are minimal. Women man the brightly lit counters that display gold and diamonds. They wear salwar-kameez. A lone man, in a tie and shirt, oversees the store. Within, in an office sits Dass’ daughter. The buzzer at the locked entrance door indicated a history of crime, but none of my respondents mentioned any frequent occurrence (in fact, Dass had earlier said that there was none). The display window has stacks of mannequin busts adorned with necklaces bathed in a torrent of bright and warm halogen lights. Buyers are almost exclusively Indian.



SAM AND RAJ

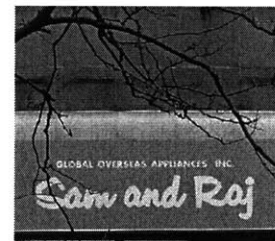
Subhash Kapadia is a mild mannered Indian about 60 years old. He was unwell on the day of our appointment, but still took me into his tiny office at the rear of the store. His store, Sam and Raj, is an electronics store. It was the first Indian

business on 74th Street, established in 1973. In a 1991 article, the New York Times attributed the establishment of the street's Indian businesses to "One man's plan."³² That one man was Subhash, his name Americanised to Sam. He had worked five years as a consulting engineer after receiving a Master in Engineering in 1968 in the US. He set up his business after being laid off.

Kapadia serves a niche diapsoric market. He sells electronic appliances that operate at 220 volts, the standard on the Indian sub-continent. His buyers are South Asians on their way home who need to carry gifts for family numbers. Electronics from the West were, for a long time, a prized possession in India. This is not so true now, as most appliances are now locally produced and sold. Bangladeshis have grown to constitute 50 percent of his customers. I inquired about the income levels of his typical customer historically. He said, "I had better customers when I started the shop", unaware of the implied prejudice.

His store was without music, unusual for an Indian street business. On my inquiry he spoke of an RBC radio channel that he occasionally played in his shop. I found the channel when I subsequently searched online.³³ It serves the East Coast of the US and claims to have 100,000 subscribers. Each of them paid to buy a special radio set. Presumably, advertisements are insufficient to cover operational costs of RBC.

Kapadia does very little by way of interior or exterior design. His shop sign is in a cursive text style, very popular with Indian stores. The Jackson Diner uses a similar style, as do some stores in Southall. His shop display is ad hoc chaos. His narrow and deep store has suitcases on the right along the wall. On the left, behind a long counter that runs the depth of the shop, are shelves that carry packaged cartons of appliances. The apparent lack of design interest and deliberateness gives



³² *New York Times*, 3 May 1991.

³³ <http://www.rbcradio.com/> (14 May 2003).

the store a personal and familiar ambience, which Kapadia's polite conversational technique consummates.

The staff at Sam and Raj need to be fluent in Hindi, English and Bengali. Kapadia does not hire recent immigrants – “I need professional people” (betraying a stereotype of newcomers from the Indian subcontinent). Kapadia's partner, Raj, quit the partnership in the early 80s to start a real estate business. The electronics store continued with its original name. In fact, the spin-off real estate business also inherited this valuable twin name and brand.

JACKSON DINER AND INDIAN TAJ



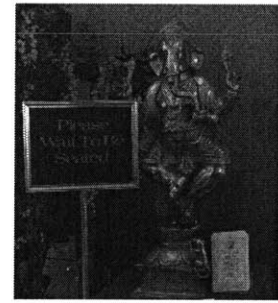
Jackson Diner is an Indian restaurant on 74th Street. It moved to its present and bigger location a few years ago.³⁴ The Diner is one in name only. Unlike the Tandoor in New Haven, that sells Indian food out of the classic horizontal striped aluminium-sided American diner, this one employs the nominal legacy of a previous



Tandoor, the Indian Diner, New Haven 23rd March '03

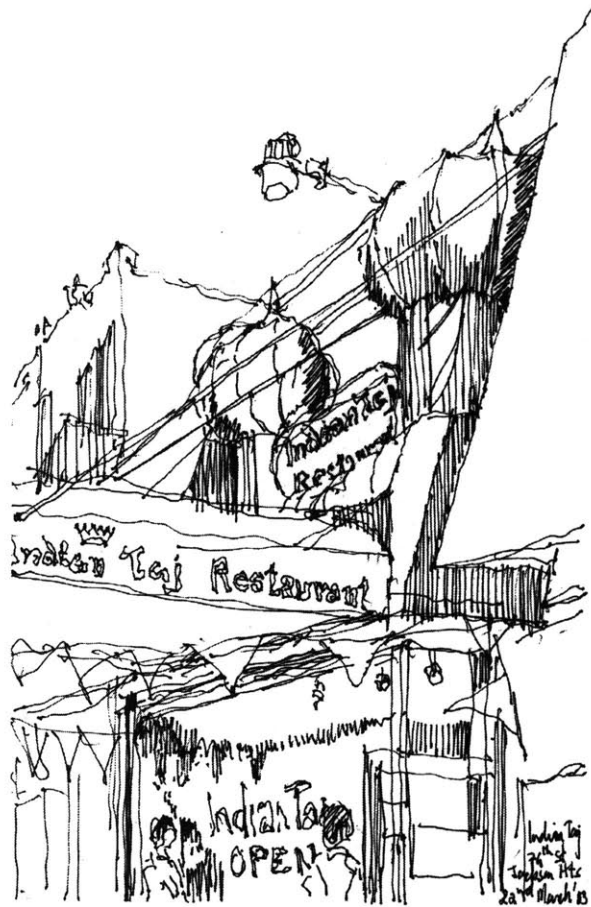
³⁴ Madhulika Khandelwal, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

owner but not the imagery. At its previous location on the same street, the restaurant had retained the Diner look, but does not anymore. The professional intervention of an interior designer is revealed by the abstract and gigantic ceiling-hung steel flower petals. They grow from a ribbed steel stem that also serves as an air-conditioning duct. India is present, but low-key. Small photographs of Indian architecture framed in huge flat toned wall panels look down into the cavernous interior. Hindu Gods play disinterested brass sentries at the entrance and at the cash register.



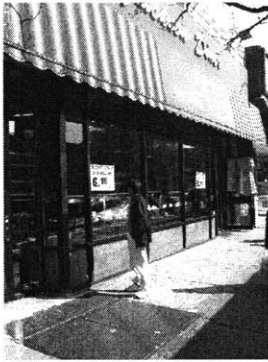
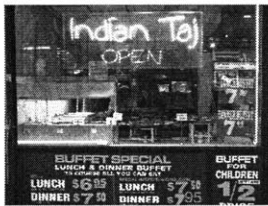
An online review considers the Jackson Diner “some sort of legend”. It is putatively the best Indian food in New York. Over the twenty years of its life it has cultivated that perception to its advantage – drawing a stream of curious New Yorkers in search of real Indian food in a real Indian neighbourhood.³⁵

The Jackson Diner has a competitor. Indian Taj is a couple of stores down the street. It’s décor within is more Indian-restaurant like with stodgy heavy furniture and stackable aluminium chairs. Outside is very expressive. The Taj has pasted two bulbous red and yellow domes on its façade – a reference to the Taj Mahal but seen through the eyes of a child looking at the brightly coloured distorted world of Agra contained in a comic book. The restaurant hopes the two onions on its façade will outrank the culturally neutral but more successful business of its competitor and neighbour, the Diner.



³⁵ *Daily News*, 6 August 6 1997...“While it looks like a neighborhood joint, the Jackson Diner lures foodies from the five boroughs.” - when speaking of the older smaller Jackson Diner.

The Taj is forced to do what Brilliant restaurant in Southall need not resort to. Brilliant does not face cut throat competition, like the Taj, and can care less about its own physical representation. Consequently, it does very little by way of interior and exterior design. But in the Indian Taj's case, the competition has reduced Indian cultural imagery to a hopelessly simplistic expression of essentialised visual triggers – the dome of the Taj Mahal.



Different in décor, the rivals are similar in one aspect. They both advertise their food in the shop window. The display windows during lunch buffet are arranged with food, ready to eat and conveniently labeled. One can judge the food before deciding to eat out of that very display. The competition is necessarily reduced to visual criteria. The tandoori chicken is an unnaturally deep red, and the rice a rich saffron. Later, Anwar Bhai at Grameen restaurant (discussed next) had dismissed such display as unhygienic, unhealthy and something a skilled professional like him would never succumb to. I empathised with his disgust at this corruption of professional ethics. Mainstream reviewers on the other hand are taken in by this display: “The buffet choices, kept at serving temperature in chafing dishes, are on display right at the front of the restaurant, so you can look through the window or even step in to see if you like the looks.”³⁶

GRAMEEN



I first walked into Grameen with images of Gandhi, a restaurant on Mass Ave in Cambridge, in my mind. I feared Grameen, like Gandhi, referred to the most visible export of its country in an embarrassingly simplistic branding of its cultural identity. Fortunately, this Bangladeshi restaurant has nothing to do with the Bangladeshi bank. Grameen means ‘rural’ in Bengali, and the restaurant is fascinatingly true to its name. It is even more interesting because it deliberately avoids doing what many Bangladeshi restaurants do (in London in particular).

³⁶ *Daily News* (New York), 10 May 1995.

Several of them advertise themselves as ‘Indian’ restaurants, a less tiresome identity that triggers easy recognition and acceptance in the mainstream.

Grameen makes no Indian pretenses. It celebrates a Bengali past, very reified and romanticized. The interior is a stylistic imitation of a domestic courtyard in a Bengali village. The narrow deep central area is the *uthana*, the courtyard, that seats about 50 customers. The flanking wall on the left, finished with a bamboo paneling, is the façade of a village hut. The wall on the right is a latticed vegetable garden, the *jangla*. On both walls hang Bengali artifacts – nests of the weaver bird, kerosene lanterns, musical instruments, and handloomed fabric. They are cultural triggers to an aware observer, and exotica to one who is not. Furniture is of bamboo, and lighting is indifferently dim. The ceiling is clad with panels of brightly coloured hand printed fabric. Bengali *Boul* (folk) singers play over the music system. I saw one waitress, Bengali, and most likely a family member. The cutting of a review from a mainstream newspaper, Village Voice, is pasted on the entrance window. It ranked Grameen 37th in a survey that I couldn’t quite follow.



Anwar Bhai owns the restaurant. He is a very likeable Bengali Muslim. He sat me down (not in the usual ‘tiny office at the rear of the store’), fed me, and explained why Grameen’s décor is so ‘charming’. He made me inspect the weaver bird nests from close – “it is real, one for the male bird, another for the female.” I spoke my Bengali, and provided a few comic minutes of linguistic amusement. My Bengali is rudimentary, vestige from being born in Kolkata and a year of formal study twenty years ago in Asansol, a town also in West Bengal in India. Anwar Bhai had visited Kolkata. He spoke of places I no longer remembered or never knew. He spoke with the thick consonants of a Bengali tongue, that conflates the v’s and b’s, and adding at the same time an airy exhaust of breath.

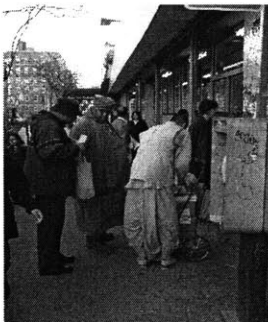
Anwar Bhai is a professional restaurateur. He came to the States seven years ago to attend a summer programme in professional development at Cornell University. For the next six years he worked at the Hilton in New York as a Food and Beverage manager. Anwar Bhai had started but not completed a masters in

Islamic History in Bangladesh. He hopes to finish it at Boston University, and asked me to inquire about the possibilities of doing so. He was visibly disappointed that I did not study there (“Boston’s best school”), but at an unknown MIT. Anwar Bhai quit the Hilton and a professional life to start Grameen and a new entrepreneurial life. He is not happy with his location, surrounded by “taxi-driver restaurants and C-class Muslims.”

Anwar Bhai’s customers are mainly Bangladeshi. They visit from out of state, some as far as Virginia and Boston. Often they place their orders before setting out on their journey. Anwar Bhai greets them with hot food as soon as they arrive. His business is busiest on the weekends. He cooks himself. The food is typically Bengali and fish dominated. 35 percent of his customers are American – “This country is very impartial.” He had a Green card interview with the INS approaching. He asked me to wish him well, and I did.

STREET MEN

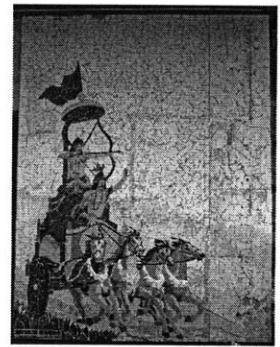
Ghansyam Das was one of only two street traders that I saw on 74th Street. But he wasn’t really one, for street trading is not permitted on the street. He is a young tall man in his early twenties. He wore a saffron *dhoti* (long, unstitched and elaborately draped bottom wear of some north Indian men), and a trendy biege jacket. His scalp had been recently tonsured, but was beginning to sprout hair again.



Ghansyam belongs to the ISKCON movement – the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the ‘hare Ram, hare Krishna’ people. He stood on the sidewalk outside Patel Brothers on a Sunday afternoon with a small shopping cart. In the cart he carried a stack of books. But he had frightening company. An enormous *sadhu* (itinerant Hindu holy man) also in orange spoke slow words to Ghansyam. I waited till he left, and then struck up a conversation with Ghansyam.

Ghansyam has a Green Card, and distributes Hindu religious material. He sets up his cart every weekend, and has been doing so for more than six months. He had previously done so in Manhattan. Ghansyam said he does not need permission from the City’s Department of Consumer Affairs, as he distributes religious material

and does not sell. Besides he has an innocuous non-permanent cart as sole accompaniment. Ghanshyam did have to ask Patel Brothers, though. They are the large grocery store outside which he stands. The “brothers are pious” and do not object to his presence. Serendipitously, Ghanshyam’s spot is close to a ceramic tile mural that depicts a scene from the Gita – a convenient backdrop and powerful cultural image, accidentally related to his enterprise.



He distributed a copy of the Gita and two smaller books to me. He then persuaded me to donate ten dollars. We bargained hard and settled at seven. But then he only returned two of my ten dollars. I let it pass. He had made a good distribution. He offered me a plastic bag for the books, and yanked one from Patel Brothers’ green vegetable stand. The brothers are also generous.

Later, I met the only other street trader of 74th Street. He was a big old Sikh (whose name I deliberately withhold). He sold phone cards out of a hole in the side of a jewelry store. The single shelf, five feet wide and a foot deep rents for 800 dollars a month. The Sikh had been its tenant for 3 days. He sits outside on the sidewalk on a foldable steel chair. He is in his seventies, and had arrived recently from Amritsar. In Punjab he had been an inspector in the Central Reserve Police Force, and had retired seven years ago. He was glad to speak to me, visibly uncomfortable on the unfamiliar sidewalk of the big bad city. He was in the US on a visitor visa, and oblivious of the violation of its status. The Big-old-Sikh lived in Queens with an acquaintance ‘from his village’. The acquaintance was a taxi driver.



I first bought a phone card – ‘Desi Talk Plus’ for 5 dollars, and then chatted about his business. It was too early for him to judge whether his business was succeeding. The Sikh said he would wait a month before taking a decision. The next day I saw his hole boarded up, and ‘FOR RENT’ scrawled across its face. But he had not decided, only arrived late. I saw him again later in the day.



4. FINDINGS

This was not really meant to be a comparative analysis of Southall and Jackson Heights; nor one, more generally, of the urban identities of Indian immigrants in the United States and the United Kingdom. It has necessarily become one. In this study of how immigrant Indians physically construct their lives, their businesses and their identities outside of India, I constantly judged Jackson Heights with Southall as a backdrop (I first visited the latter). In this chapter I will articulate those comparative judgments. I will also state and discuss a few generalisations I formulated while conducting my research. The first few look at the aggregated scales of streets and neighbourhoods. The subsequent look more closely at individual businesses, businesspeople and their decisions.

The evidence suggests, expectedly, that businesses in both cases adopt physical identities that are determined economically. Here I will discuss how and in what circumstances Indian immigrant businesses either advertise, disguise, or surrender an Indian identity. In Southall's case, when the unit of analysis is aggregated above the individual business to the street and neighbourhood, there is evidence of a strong ethnonationalist undercurrent. But its individual businesses rarely grapple with this deliberately. The Sikh's strong political and religious organisations (and their constructed physical manifestations), their sense of history, and the geographic and cultural specificity of Southall's immigrant population all appear to contribute to the Punjabi pride so palpable on its streets. But 74th Street in Jackson Heights lacks all the above ('Indian' ethnonationalism is too broad and artificial compared to that of the Sikh). 74th Street also has a shorter history, and is not surrounded by as dense or homogenous a residential congregation.

COMPARATIVE ORIGINS

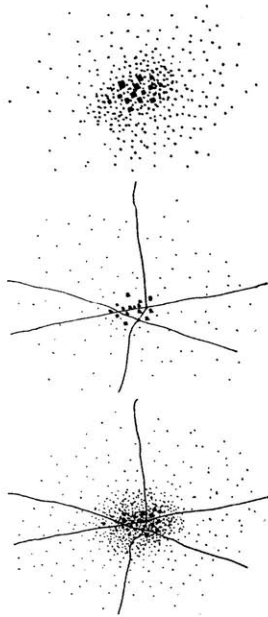
At the start of my research it seemed clear to me that the poorer end of the Indian immigrant spectrum was more likely to congregate, and create their

distinctive urban environments. The premise was born of the following generalisations. British Sikhs came as working class migrants from rural Punjab who did not speak English, lacked capital and were often uneducated. It was a group that felt the need to congregate, and did so very successfully in Southall. On the other hand, Indians in the US are known to be English-speaking, affluent and urbane. They would, I argued, experience minimal need for the filial, kinship and linguistic resources that a spatial congregation provides.

As expected, Southall's Sikh congregation of residences and businesses followed the reasoning that underlay my premise. But to analyse Jackson Heights, primarily a business congregation and an anomaly within the successful and affluent Indian American world is not that easy. Today it is decidedly low-end and would appear to fit my thinking. The problem, however, is that it has not always been decidedly low-end. Madhulika Khandelwal, Director of the Asian American Center at Queens College and one who has researched the Indians of Queens extensively, was not fully convinced of my reasoning. I came to agree with her skepticism after I collected conflicting evidence from Jackson Heights.

Dr. Khandelwal's reservations stemmed from the fact that early Indian businesses in Jackson Heights (of the 70s and 80s) did not congregate to serve (or provide a home for) marginal and disconnected Indian immigrants. On the contrary, well-educated entrepreneurs operated stores that served the middle-class south Asian population of the New York region. For instance, Subhash Kapadia, owner of the first Indian store on 74th Street, came as a student, received a Masters in Engineering, and worked for five years as a consultant before establishing Sam and Raj, an electronics store in 1973. He and others like him were typical shop owners in the 70s. Confronted with their profile, I could not explain, with the reasoning I had developed, the birth of the early Indian businesses on 74th Street in Jackson Heights.

My reasoning had two flaws. First, I disregarded the entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants, and assumed the white-collar immigrant Indian to be the only successful Indian (especially in the States); everyone else, successful store owners too, I lumped in a 'marginal' category. With this thinking, I quickly categorised a congregation of businesses as poor, for businessmen could surely not be successful. Second, I overlooked the real need for Indian products that even a highly mainstream-integrated Indian population continues to have – mainly music, groceries, objects of religion, clothing and jewelry. To satisfy this need, a spatial congregation provides businesses with obvious economies of scale. Stores can mutually capture the stream of South Asian visitors to sustain their businesses, even in the absence of surrounding residential catchments. The congregation grows by accrual as new businesses establish themselves relying on the preexisting stream of customers.



Southall and 74th Street are in a sense similarly positioned now – an overwhelming Indian retail presence that serves a regional market of dispersed Indians. However, their origins and subsequent growth trajectories to reach this position have been strikingly different. Southall's early businesses served a dense local residential congregation of Punjabis and Sikhs. 74th Street's early businesses were located at an accessible and affordable hub that served a dispersed customer group. Both have grown over the years and now display similar characteristics – a mix of low income residences, and a congregation of thriving businesses that serve a dispersed market.

AVAILABLE MYTHS

Ravinder Singh Bhalla, an American-born Sikh lawyer, was asked in September 2002, by a guard to remove his turban for a search before entering Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Centre. Bhalla refused; was in turn refused admission, went

to court, and established his turban was not available to be removed and searched at whim.¹ Bhalla is just another in a long procession of Sikh males who have had to fight for their turban, a cloth 15 feet long, and supposedly one of the five religious markers of their faith. Cohn recounts the case of GS Sagar, who in 1959 was similarly denied employment by Manchester Transport in the United Kingdom. Sagar had questioned why it had been acceptable for Sikh soldiers to wear their turbans when they fought for, and died with the Allies in the world wars, yet not when the Sikhs were within their midst.² Cohn answered Sagar's question. Anglican society feared the regressive effect sarees and turbans, markers of an uncivilised and inferior way of life, would have in their sophisticated and culturally evolved way of life.³



But wrapped within the Sikh turban is a forgotten and devastating irony. The British in the 19th century were mainly responsible for making the turban a marker of Sikh males. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Sikh Guru, in the 18th century had made unshorn hair one of the five visible symbols of the faith. There was no allusion to turbans (though the Sikh were expected to cover their heads when within a Gurudwara, the Sikh place of worship).⁴ Turbans appeared after the British defeated the Sikh in 1849. The long-haired men were worthy adversaries and deemed suitable to man the British Indian army. The British commenced on building a narrative that established the Sikh as a martial race. They recruited them in vast numbers.⁵ They then gave them an elegant uniformed turban – “to control their wildness.” This military turban became a marker for all Sikh men, that much

¹ *New York Times*, 28 January 2003, “How one man took a stand and changed federal policy toward the Sikh community” by Ronald Smothers.

² Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.106.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108

⁵ *Ibid.* The British were careful to recruit only the long-haired Keshdhari Sikhs, wild men who looked like Sikhs (or else their narrative-building would be meaningless). The other kind, Sehajdhari Sikh, do not keep long hair.

later Bhalla and Sagar would ironically strive to defend against Anglo-American society.

The British provided the Sikh with one myth, of virility. The other, of the hardworking, honest, and big-hearted rural Sikh, is of their own making. Its origins stem from the predominantly rural nature of the Sikh population, which is also homogenously Jat (a farming caste of northwest India).⁶ After Partition in 1947, most of the irrigated Sikh-owned lands went to Pakistani Punjab, and the Sikh came to Indian Punjab, many landless and impecunious. India's Green Revolution of the 70s brought prosperity to Punjab, making it the country's most prosperous state (it continues to produce a wholly disproportionate share of the national food crop).⁷ A narrative that encompasses a long agricultural history, recently interrupted, and followed by a spectacular coming back, contributes to the construction of the rural Sikh myth. Bhangra, a vigorous kind of Punjabi music, celebrates, with woeful longing, lost rural Punjab. Jind Mahi (my life, my love), a hugely popular folk song, now remixed by British Sikhs says this in Punjabi (in evocative lyrics that my incompetent translation loses):

Jind Mahi, if you go abroad
And you forget your land
Your language, your self
Drift for even a moment
You will lose us all.

⁶ Holly M. Hapke, "Agrarian Sources of Sikh Nationalism" in *Punjab in Perspective: Proceedings of the Research Committee on Punjab Conference, 1987*, eds. Surjit Dulai and Arthur Helweg (East Lansing, Michigan: Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University, 1991), pp. 58-66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.60. The Green Revolution significantly raised agricultural production levels (for example, a three-fold increase in Punjab's wheat production), by introducing new varieties of crop, low-interest rural credit, mechanical harvesting and extensive irrigation networks.

Jind Mahi, if you visit Patiala
Bring me silk tassles
Half white, half black.⁸

Both myths, the virile and the rural, permeate the streets of Southall and find expression graphically in the Glassy Junction's giant Sikh hoarding, and musically in the lyrical hypnotic beats of British bhangra that play at every street vendor and emerge out of every cruising car. Unfortunately, 74th Street in Jackson Heights does not have a finely crafted myth to draw from to proudly construct an identity. The one myth that Indian Americans do have – of model minority and educated professionalism, works against the street. Both the residents and businesses of Jackson Heights don't quite fit that story (from the sidelines at the 1995 India Day parade in Manhattan, read a placard: 'I DON'T WANT TO BE A DOCTOR, WE ARE NOT A MODEL MINORITY').⁹



Southall, it seems, is able to build on available myths. 74th Street in Jackson Heights, on the other hand suffers from its inability to. The street cannot quite create the buzz and energy that Southall's Broadway breeds so successfully. I present this judgment with hesitation and a necessary caveat. My six days in Jackson Heights and fourteen in Southall give me insufficient evidence by which to judge them so peremptorily.

BRANDING AND POSITIONING

When the individual business is the scale of analysis, myths silently disappear behind economics. To grapple with the issue of commercial identity I will introduce two terms from the world of marketing and advertising – branding and positioning. Immigrant entrepreneurs (like any other) are skilled marketers. They brand

⁸ Jind Mahi is a Punjabi folk song. This version is sung by Malkit Singh, a British Bhangra singer (whose portrait adorns the Glassy Junction in Southall). Patiala is a town in Punjab.

⁹ Madhulika Khandelwal, *Becoming American, being Indian : an immigrant community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 179.

themselves (project a self-identity) to appear most attractive to their targeted customers (positioning). Furthermore (and again utilising a corporate term), businesses are keenly aware of their perceived core competency, and they will pursue a business that they are seen to be good at. Often this restricts them to the operation of Indian restaurants when positioning themselves to serve New York or London's mainstream. I contend (along with a host of store owners in Southall and Jackson Heights) that businesses are not particularly concerned with romanticised notions of identity – ethnic, cultural or national. They run businesses and the profit motive dictates the identity they assume.

The decision that holds primacy is whether the business seeks to serve a wider mainstream market or a parochial Indian market. When either of these two groups alone cannot constitute a sustainable customer base, businesses may choose a delicately diluted position in the midst of the two. Depending on the decision, these businesses brand and position themselves very differently. I discuss these variations in the sections that follow.

MAINSTREAM TOURISM

In certain respects, the Indian streets that I studied and the Chinatowns of American cities are analogous (this would also be true of all, if not most, other ethnic enclaves, but my minimal reading of their literature prevents a more comprehensive comparative analysis). Ronald Takaki describes the tourist economy that sustained and expanded Chinatowns in early 20th century urban America.¹⁰ The enclaves advertised themselves as “Oriental Quarters” with an “exotic atmosphere” within the city. To an extent, Southall and Jackson Heights do the same. Both have businesses that cater to significant numbers of non-Indian customers (restaurants especially). They have, consequently, evolved design devices that enhance their

¹⁰ Ronald Takaki, “Ethnic Islands: The Emergence of urban Chinese America” in *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Back Bay, 1998), pp.230-269.

appeal to the mainstream market (I discuss them next). But Chinatowns and Indian streets are not fully analogous. A striking difference is that of the service industry. Early Chinatowns were home to laundries operated by Chinese immigrants who served a niche mainstream market.¹¹ Indian streets have no such niche segment that is specifically geared to serving the mainstream. The only niche on the street, if any, is that of the Indian restaurant.

With two very different client pools to simultaneously serve – the Indian and the mainstream, stores now position themselves carefully. Some employ triggers of recognition targeted at a particular group. For example, Indian Taj, the restaurant on 74th Street, uses the trigger of the Taj Mahal – appreciated and understood by one who is only superficially aware of India. At the other extreme of this recognition spectrum is Karol Bagh, a department store also in Jackson Heights, that refers to a market in Delhi. This refined trigger is understood (appreciated or not) only by those who would know – the inner circle. However (and to make another comparison with Chinatowns), these businesses do not do what many Chinese stores do. A single Chinese restaurant may have two names – one in a Chinese language, and the other in English with a completely different meaning. This clever and simple device, allows the business to simultaneously position itself to serve two independent markets.¹²

In Southall and Jackson Heights, Indian restaurants have evolved their own devices to appear attractive to the mainstream. Brilliant and Madhu's in Southall, and Jackson Diner and Indian Taj on 74th Street have significant numbers of mainstream customers. Of these four cases, Brilliant does the least to enhance its appeal. It sits on an assured and formidable reputation and worries "only about



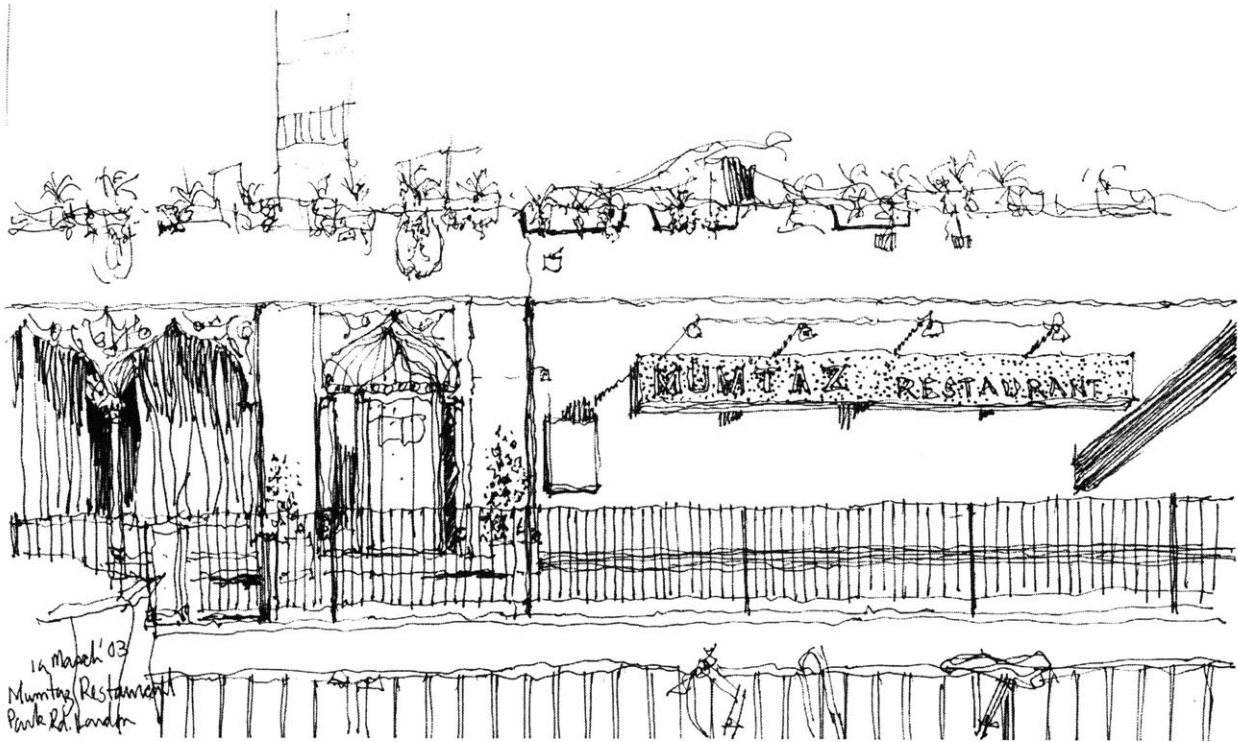
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Tunney Lee, research interview (March, 2003).

cleanliness.”¹³ Jackson Diner, also iconic and successful, employs fairly mainstream interior design devices (like flat bold tones and abstracted air conditioning ducts). Its neighbour, Indian Taj, with a very successful and proximate competitor, appears to be the most expressive with its two onion domes outside (though inside is less deliberate). Both, the Diner and the Taj, employ the actual product – cooked food, displayed in the shop window, to entice customers (indicative perhaps of an unaware and non-discerning customer group). Madhu’s in Southall, operated by a trio of second generation siblings of Kenyan-Indian roots, has adopted a slick European image in entirety, with no reference to any Indian or Kenyan origin. Its case may however be an anomaly. Its business is sustained by outside catering and not by its retail restaurant. It therefore has less to lose, and more room to experiment with its decor.

Off the street, in central London or Manhattan, orphaned without the umbrella of a collective Indian identity, Indian businesses do things a little differently. Necessarily, these businesses position themselves to capture the mainstream. They do so in three main ways. First, some businesses exaggerate their Indian-ness to appear attractive to the putatively unaware Western mind (driven also by the need to compete with others that do the same). The norm that these immigrant business people aspire to is not the reified India that lies within their own minds, but their perception of the exotic India that lies within the Western mind. Ornate sculptures, wall hangings, loud colours and kitsch images of India predominate the décor. Mumtaz, an Indian restaurant on Park Road in Central London, is very deliberate about its imagery, which it strongly exhibits as an arcade of Islamic arches on its façade (on the extreme left of my sketch, on the following page). Inside there are even more. These devices are richer and more involved than the simplistic imagery of 74th Street’s Indian Taj. In England, some Indian restaurants can also play with

¹³ Kewal Anand (Brilliant restaurant’s proprietor), research interview (March 2003).



the colonial mystique of India's past – a foolproof attraction in London. Bombay Brasserie, one of London's better known Indian restaurants, for example, can 'transport you not just 4000 miles, but also to the gracious days of the Raj.'¹⁴

Second, some Indian businesses serve a mainstream yuppie clientele (including 2nd generation Indians and young Indian professionals recently immigrated). These businesses will adopt a hybrid of identities, presumably incorporating the best design elements of the mainstream and the exotic – a kind of cultural extractionism. This fusion image is the skillful, at times witty marriage of 'slick western minimalism' with the distilled exoticness of India, stripped of all but its supposedly identity giving essence. This mainstream chic correlates with sophistication, cool, hip and a host of other characteristics that privilege the tastes of the urban elite. Bhindi Bazaar in Boston, though not really a case I studied, is a good example.¹⁵ It



¹⁴ Online review of the Bombay Brasserie, London at <http://www.ashextourism.com/hash/itinerary.htm> (15 May 2003).

¹⁵ Bhindi Bazaar translates to Ocra market. The original is a market in Mumbai. I had no



is located off trendy Newbury street. Its décor has been described, online, variously as “a converted Starbucks”¹⁶ and a “neo-Indian”,¹⁷ “contemporary, warm, inviting room.”¹⁸

Finally, at the other extreme of this mainstream marketplace are some Indian businesses that deliberately choose anonymity over identity. The corner shops of London are a good example. Indians own and operate most of them. Yet, they do not display, in fact many deliberately conceal, their south Asian identity. Just off Baker Street tube station, on Melcombe Street in the heart of Anglican London, one corner shop calls itself ‘Dorset News’. It is owned and operated by a Gujarati family, and in this context has nothing to gain economically by adopting a risky non-conforming identity.

cases like Bhindi Bazaar, because, by definition they locate in trendy city center areas, which Southall and Jackson Heights are surely not.

¹⁶ http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/food_drink/dining/documents/02542227.htm (14 May 2003).

¹⁷ <http://www.bhindibazaar.com> (14 May 2003). The restaurant’s website quoted a review found in the Boston magazine.

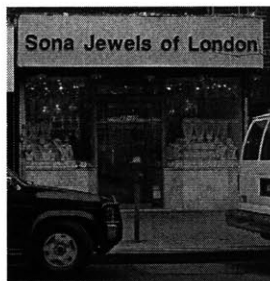
¹⁸ <http://www.ministryofsluggo.com/ff.html> (14 May 2003).

LOCAL AND REGIONAL INDIANS

Southall and Jackson Heights have detached themselves from the local urban economies of London and New York, and positioned themselves to serve a regional, often national, and sometimes international market of immigrant Indians. Southall attracts buyers from all of Great Britain and a few from far Western Europe. Jackson Heights serves the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The congregations have relied on extended ethnic networks and catchments to sustain their large business conglomerations. The highly successful positioning has made these congregations iconic in the imaginations of the larger immigrant community. Weekends are disproportionately busy as a consequence.

Within this Indian market there are various shades of identity at work. Some old and established businesses re-position themselves to capture a more affluent Indian clientele. This phenomenon is more apparent in Southall, which is gaining affluence as 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants acquire increasing amounts of wealth (and also because, unlike Jackson Heights, it has greater cross-sectional appeal with Indians of all classes). Jag Banwait's cloth store and Poonam Anand's Madhu's restaurant belong in this category. They have both recently 'upgraded' their décor and are targeting affluent Indians who have been born and brought up in England or elsewhere in Europe. This customer pool expects the imagery of Oxford Street in central London (which sets the retail norms for the city). The Southall Town Centre Strategy (prepared by the Southall Regeneration Partnership, a local private-public initiative) puts it just right: "If Southall town center is to retain its appeal to second and third generation residents it must offer a wider range of shops, including some western style shops presently found only in neighbouring town centers."¹⁹

¹⁹ Draft of Southall Town Centre Strategy, 2003, p. 9 (prepared by the Southall Regeneration Partnership).



That the second generation need a slicker look is not always true. Namaskar, Ruma Poppat's Indian artifact and ornate furniture shop in Southall, is both run by a second generation Indian, and also serves that group. Her shop is atypical, recent, and the only one of its kind on Broadway. Ruma seeks to tap the curiosity of British born Indians, who also perhaps view India through an exotic lens. Butala Emporium in Jackson Heights has a similar product line. But it is not like Ruma's store. It is more practical, and serves an older first generation clientele. It does not wear or exaggerate a deliberate Indian-ness. Its products, though, would outdo Ruma's – stacks and stacks of Ganesh idols. The store sells religious material, for which there exists a real demand. There are no artifacts here.

On the street, businesses usually advertise their Indian lineage. Though, at others times they disguise it or surrender it. Department stores that sell Indian products find it important to advertise their ethnic authenticity. So, for example, in Southall you would find Palika Bazaar, Chandi Chowk and Meena Bazaar, and Karol Bagh in Jackson Heights. These local businesses share their names with well-known markets in Delhi. The contextual reference serves as a stamp of authenticity of lineage. However, at other times, Indian linkages are buried under more important ones. The jewelers of 74th Street are a good example. The "of London" linkage they advertise stems from the assured quality of English sterling gold. But it also hints (falsely) at the international experience of the store's owners – an assured trigger of respect in an urban Indian mind.

My final category of discussion lies squarely in the realm of assertive ethnonationalism. In it belong, as examples, three businesses that I documented – Brilliant restaurant and the Glassy Junction pub from Southall, and Grameen restaurant from Jackson Heights. The layers of meaning that clad their identity, and the complexity of that expression makes them the hardest to analyse. Each of the three adopts an individualistic position, seemingly driven more by personal, rather than economic choices.

Brilliant, with its wooden sculptures of twin Masai warriors, is plainly and unapologetically defiant. Its proprietor, Kewal Anand, uses them to boldly announce a Kenyan past that he believes is seen with derision by the Indian immigrants straight from India (who constitute the predominant majority of Southall's Indian population). It must help that he does not depend on Southall's residents for his business. Half his customers are mainstream British and most of the other half, affluent Indians, are not resident in Southall.



Grameen, Anwar Bhai's Bangladeshi restaurant in Jackson Heights, deliberately avoids being subsumed into world of 'Indian restaurants' that robs Bangladeshis of their identity. Anwar Bhai recreates a romanticised Bangladeshi rural setting that achieves two goals. First, it attracts Bangladeshis (and also Bengalis from the Indian state of West Bengal) by offering them Bengal's distinctive menu (heavily dependent on fish, and with spices that are markedly different from the north Indian food that has become synonymous with Indian food in the West). Second, it allows these Bangladeshi's a space and an experience that has long been threatened and eroded by an expansive and inclusive Indian identity. Anwar Bhai is able to achieve this by having a critical mass of willing Bengali customers, many of who travel long distances to partake in his Bengali celebration. Further, his intriguing environment has also given Grameen a quaint appearance in the eye of the mainstream. 35 percent of his customers are mainstream New Yorkers, fascinated by and curious of the world he has created.



Southall's Glassy Junction pub is the third and last of my examples in this deliberate and apparently non-economic category. Of all my cases, the Glassy Junction is by far the most assertive of an ethnonationalist identity. Its involved and detailed references to rural Punjab and virile Sikhs, draw from widely available myths and perpetuate them locally. Its customers are local Punjabi boys and men (I saw no women in either of two visits to the pub; this was not surprising). The pub is almost an expected and natural overspill space for all the Punjabi pride that flows



on the streets of Southall. The elaborately constructed identity that it wears does not impinge on its economic worth. But, nor does it appear to have been moulded by economic determinants. The pub's identity lies in an inscrutable space that simultaneously establishes it as an object of local pride, an instigator of cultural allegiance to distant Punjab, and also as a successful business enterprise.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

In this thesis, I hoped to straddle two disciplines – the observation and analysis of built form, and the socioeconomic determinants of that built form. My research hoped to build on the place making literature of immigrants. Much of this literature (and mainstream opinion) builds on the premise that immigrants are primarily seeking to establish and relocate their culture in a dislocated context. Consequently, often immigrants are inadvertently portrayed as cultural objects incapable of acting in an economic world. My research aimed to establish that in the process of earning a livelihood, immigrant businesspeople construct identities and aesthetics that primarily further economic self-interests, and that these are then mistakenly believed to be their attempts at 'establishing culture'.

However, my research also indicates a disconnect between the scale of the business owner and the aggregated street. The two at times appear to be acting independently of each other (especially in some of Southall's cases, where ethnonationalist and economic identities exist independent and in spite of each other). My research did not analyse religious and social institutions (nor their physical manifestations). A study more comprehensive than mine, which includes the analysis of commercial, social and religious identities will be more useful in explaining many of the things that I have been unable to.

APPENDIX A

Elements to document of businesses in Jackson Heights and Southall

Exterior

1. Setting on the street
2. Relationship with the street (encroachment mainly)
3. Signage
4. Display window
5. Publicity material – ads and flyers (menus too)

Interior

1. Serving staff
 - Attire
 - Ethnicity/Race
 - Language
2. Decor
 - Lighting
 - Materials
 - Design and cultural references
 - Art
3. Music

Customer profile

1. Typical customer
 - Ethnicity and race
 - Income group
 - Residential location
 - Mainstream or local*
 - Regular or Occasional

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